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The Female Barber Detective;



OR,
Joe Phenix in Silver City.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

CHAPTER I.
A STRANGER.

SILVER CITY, in the southwestern part of the Territory of New Mexico, is the thriving center of a prosperous mining country. It is during the close of a bright May day

"NO GALOOT EVER GETS ME INTO A TIGHT PLACE."

the train of the branch road running from Deming, where it connects with the main line of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, to Silver City, had just arrived.

The passengers disembarked, some twenty people in all.

Three ladies were in the party, two of whom were residents of the town. Friends were waiting to greet them, and with them they departed, but the third evidently was a stranger, for she looked around with an inquiring air.

The hotel runners were on the alert, and hastened to announce the merits of their respective houses. The lady, though, paid no attention to them, but hastened into the depot in search of the railway agent.

This agent was a crusty old fellow, rather inclined to snub all questioners, but something about this unprotected female won upon him, for she was one to attract attention, even in a crowd.

Rather above the medium height, with a finely developed figure, and a pleasant face, which could not be called beautiful, for the features were rather irregular, and strongly marked.

That she possessed both spirit and determination, the keen-set, flashing eyes and the resolute mouth and chin plainly indicated.

"I am on my way to a mining camp known as Bearopolis, situated on Bear Creek," she said. "I was told that I would have to go by stage from Silver City."

"That is correct, miss," the depot master replied. "The stage goes only twice a week, but you can take it to-morrow morning at seven o'clock."

"I have a trunk—a small one—"

"That is all right! It will go on the stage, so you needn't worry about it. I will speak to the driver, and when he comes you give him your check; then he will attend to the matter."

"I am very much obliged, and will you be kind enough to direct me to a respectable hotel, where I can find accommodations for the night?" the lady asked.

"Well, there isn't much difference," the depot master replied. "Any of them will be tolerably certain to take good care of you. Take the first one you come to; that is about as good a direction as I can give you."

"Thanks; much obliged."

And as the lady turned away she noticed that a man who had been standing near enough to overhear the conversation was observing her intently.

He was dressed in the rough fashion common to men on the border, who are compelled to toil in the open air, wearing neither coat nor vest, a blue flannel shirt supplying the place of those garments.

The man was rather an ill-looking fellow, for he had a thin face with irregular features, the chin covered with a short sandy beard, while his eyes were a peculiar light-gray in hue, with a greenish cast—uncertain, treacherous eyes.

As the lady approached the door, the stranger came up to her, took off his hat and made a polite bow.

"I beg your pardon, but as I heard you say something about going to Bearopolis, I thought I would take the liberty of speaking to you. I live at Bearopolis, and thought, perhaps, I could give you some information."

"I am very glad to meet you, sir," the lady replied, her face brightening up. "I have never been out in this country before, and so am a total stranger."

"Yes, I reckoned so. Well, I am one of the old residents in the Bearopolis district, for I went to the camp about a month after gold was discovered there and have lived in the town ever since; so if you want to know about anybody in the place you couldn't strike a man better posted than I am."

"How lucky I am, then, to meet you," the lady exclaimed.

"My name is Mignon Lawrence, and I have come all the way from New York to live with my uncle, James Lawrence, at Bearopolis."

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Lawrence; my name is John Bickerstaff," and he shook hands with her.

"James Lawrence, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, now, I must say that I don't remember a Lawrence in the town; and yet, there are mighty few men in the camp whom I don't know. What is his business?"

"He was going to engage in mining," she explained. "He used to keep a general store in Kansas City."

"You see, sir, my father died quite suddenly in New York, and left me poorly off, so I wrote to Uncle James and he replied that he would be glad to have me come on and keep house for him. He is an old bachelor, and I was always a great favorite with him."

"Ah! yes, I see; but it is strange I don't know your uncle."

"It may be possible that he hasn't got there yet," Miss Lawrence suggested.

"He wrote me to come right on, and sent money for my fare, and in his letter he said that it might be possible I would get to Bearopolis before he did, but that, if he was detained, I would find a letter in the post office explaining about the matter when I arrived."

"That is just it!" the man declared. "He hasn't got to the town yet, and that is the reason I don't know him."

"Yes, I suppose so," the young woman said, in a simple way.

"I am going to Bearopolis by the stage to-morrow morning, so we will make the trip together," Bickerstaff informed her.

"You will want a place to stop there, of course, until your uncle comes?"

"Oh, yes."

"I can recommend you to a nice woman who will take the best of care of you."

"I will be much obliged if you will," Miss Lawrence exclaimed, in a grateful way.

"It will not be any trouble; and I can take you to a good hotel here, too, and the stage will call there for you in the morning."

Again the young woman thanked him.

"Oh! that is all right!" Bickerstaff exclaimed, in a magnanimous way. "I will be glad to do all I can for you."

Then he conducted Miss Lawrence to the nearest hotel and made arrangements for her accommodation.

"I will see you in the morning when the stage comes," he announced, as he took his departure.

Down the street Bickerstaff went, until he came to a rather dingy-looking saloon, which he entered.

A group of men in the place were drinking at the bar, and at a table in the rear of the room sat a good-looking young man, whose swarthy complexion, jet black eyes, mustache and imperial, suggested that he was a foreigner—a Mexican, probably.

Bickerstaff took a seat at the table.

"I have spotted one party," he said.

"That is good! What is she like?" the swarthy-faced man asked.

Bickerstaff described Miss Lawrence, and related the conversation which he had with her.

"Well, she certainly tells a straightforward story enough," the other assumed.

"Yes, but there is one suspicious thing about it," Bickerstaff observed. "There is no man by the name of Lawrence in the town, and the story she tells, that he wrote it might be possible she would get there before him, may be only a trick to divert suspicion."

"It would only be natural, you know, for people to inquire why she came to Bearopolis, and it would be necessary for her to have some plausible story ready to account for her presence in the town."

"Of course."

"But, I say, isn't there some mistake about this matter?" Bickerstaff demanded, abruptly. "It does not seem to me to be at all likely that the New York sharps would select a woman to do such a job as this."

"That is very true; it does not seem

to be probable, but I have perfect faith that the party who sent the information knew just how the matter had been arranged."

"I was warned to be on the lookout for a woman, and unless the party was certain that a woman had been sent I would not have been notified."

"It is mighty strange," the other averred.

"Of course, under the circumstances it was not possible for my informant to learn all the particulars, so I am in the dark as to the particular sort of game which is to be played."

"This woman will know, though—that is, if we have got hold of the right one."

"No doubt about that, and I will at once set to work to get the truth out of her," the Mexican announced, with an air of determination.

"No doubt there will be plenty of chances to get at her after she arrives in Bearopolis."

"I shall not wait until then," the other declared. "In an affair of this kind prompt action is best."

"This is a game of life or death, you know, and when there is a chance that a man's existence may hang trembling in the balance, delays are dangerous. Let me explain," and the two men put their heads together.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE ROAD.

At the hotel where Miss Lawrence sought shelter she was treated with the warm-hearted hospitality characteristic of the true Westerner.

The middle-aged hostess especially took a decided interest in the girl, and so she went out of her way to tender a warning in regard to Bickerstaff.

"I ain't the kind of woman to say nothing about nobody!" she declared in a burst of confidence. "But then, ag'in, I ain't the sort of hairpin to allow anybody to make a fool of anybody else if I kin stop it by putting my spoon into the soup, and that is why I want to give you a word of caution."

"I will be very much obliged, indeed," Miss Lawrence assented, gratefully.

"Of course you don't know anything 'bout this hyer Bickerstaff?"

"Oh, no; he is a stranger to me."

"Sartin! and he has talked nice and squar' to you, but I tell you right up and down it won't do a mite of hurt for you to keep your eyes on him."

"Oh, is he not to be trusted?" Miss Lawrence asked.

"Wal, now, my dear young lady, I ain't going to say right out whether he kin be trusted or not, for it wouldn't do for me to come right out with my opinion, you know, for if you should happen to let out that I had said anything about the matter it might get me into trouble."

"I can assure you I will be very careful not to betray you!" the girl declared.

"Oh, I ain't afeared of that!" the woman replied. "That is, I mean I reckon you wouldn't go to do it, but things of that kind pop out kinder by accident sometimes, so I ain't going to say nothing much about the man."

"My old man and me keep this hotel and it ain't the thing for us to talk about our customers, and then, too, of my own knowledge I don't know anything ag'in this hyer Bickerstaff—who, by the way, everybody calls Sandy, for his own name is altogether too long a handle for the boys to bother with."

"Yes, I am aware that it is the fashion to apply nicknames in the mining region."

"That is a fact! And I reckon that about half the men in the town are better known by their nicknames than they are by their real ones."

"But to come back to this hyer Sandy; I have heered men that I am sure know what they are talking about say that Sandy is a gambler and a bad egg generally—a feller, you understand, that they wouldn't trust any further than they could see him."

"I comprehend, and I am much obliged to you for your friendly warning."

The Bearopolis stage drew up at the hotel promptly on time.

Bickerstaff was the only passenger, and he warmly greeted the girl when she made her appearance.

The landlady was on hand to bid Miss Lawrence good-by, and as the stage driver—a lean, lanky, hatchet-faced, lantern-jawed fellow, named Jacob Thompson, but universally known as Skinny—was an old acquaintance, she commended the young lady to his care.

"Now, mind you, Skinny, you take good care of Miss Lawrence or else you'll have me in your wool!" the buxom hostess warned.

"That is all right!" the driver responded, with assumed dignity. "You kin bet your life I allers take good keer of everybody w'ot rides in my hearse."

Miss Lawrence entered the vehicle, and away the rickety hack went.

"There isn't much travel from Silver City to Bearopolis, I suppose, judging from the fact that we are the only passengers," the girl remarked.

"Well, there isn't much of a rush up that way now," the other assented. "Fact is, the camp has got over the boom and is just kinder running along without anybody in it getting rich very fast."

"It is a small place, you know," he explained. "There isn't more than a hundred people in the town itself, with another hundred, maybe, in the gulches within ten miles of the place."

"I understand, and am surprised, for I had got the idea that it was quite a place."

"No, it doesn't amount to much, and I don't reckon it ever will, either, although at one time, just arter the first gold strikes were made in the neighborhood, most everybody thought it was going to be a big town, but only few good mines were discovered, and so the boom soon died out."

Then he proceeded to relate the particulars of the original discoveries of gold in the neighborhood.

The girl listened with a great deal of interest, and so the time passed away.

The road ran within sight of the peculiar formation known as Bears' Peak, and Bickerstaff pointed it out to the lady.

"I reckon there must have been a heap of bears 'round hyer when the first white man came into the country," he assumed, "for that mountain ther is named Bears' Peak, and the big creek which rises in the foothills of the Pinos Altos Mountains and runs into the Gila River, is called Bear Creek, and that is where this camp gets its name of Bearopolis from."

"Ah, yes, I see."

By this time the hack had got into a wild and desolate section of country. It was traversing a rolling prairie, thickly studded with clumps of scrubby pines and stunted oaks.

Suddenly the horses came to an abrupt halt.

"Hello! What is the trouble, I wonder?" Bickerstaff exclaimed, and he poked his head out of the window, but only quickly to draw it in again.

"My goodness! We are stopped by a road-agent!" he cried.

"A road-agent?" Miss Lawrence repeated, as though she did not understand what he meant.

"Yes, a robber."

"A robber? Oh, how dreadful!"

"Very disagreeable, indeed; and when these fellows make their appearance it is of no use to offer resistance, for by so doing a man stands a chance to lose his life as well as his valuables."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I have been held up a half a dozen times, and so I am posted. The rascals will not make much out of me, though, for I have only a few dollars in my pocket."

"And I haven't any money to speak of," Miss Lawrence declared. "I only had five dollars left when I reached Silver City."

"He will have to be content with what he can get, for it isn't our fault if we are not rolling in wealth."

The man who had appeared so suddenly in the trail was dressed like a miner, in big boots, into which his coarse pantaloons were tucked, a red flannel shirt, and a broad-brimmed slouch hat.

A long black mask completely concealed his face.

He had stepped out from behind a clump of pines, and, with a leveled revolver, motioned to the driver to stop.

He was about a hundred feet from the hack when he appeared, but by the time the driver had brought the steeds to a halt, he was only some fifty feet off.

Skinny Jake was taken completely by surprise by the unexpected opposition.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" he exclaimed. "If this don't beat my time I don't want a cent!"

"Hands up, driver, if you don't want to get plugged!" the road-agent cried, in an evidently assumed voice, to disguise his real tones.

"All right!" and Skinny stuck up his right hand, while he grasped the lines in his left.

"You kin git along with my elevating one paw, I reckon, 'co's it will not be safe for me to let go of the lines to put up the both."

"You see, stranger, I've got one mighty ugly beast of a hoss, hyer—a reg'lar devil of a brute, and if he didn't feel that I had a tight line on him the cuss is jest as likely to make a bolt on it as not."

"Oh, that is all right so long as you don't try to monkey with a weapon," the road-agent assured. "If you try that game—"

"W'ot do you take me fer?" the driver interrupted. "You can bet yer bottom dollar that I won't give you the ghost of a chance to plug me."

"But I say, ain't you kinder making a mistake in holding this hyer hearse up?" the driver queried. "I have only got a couple of passengers, and I don't believe either one on 'em is well heeled in the lucre line."

"There's no express matter this trip, and the mail bag is so mighty slim that I reckon thar ain't over a couple of dozen letters in it."

"Well, times are rather hard, you see, and a man can't expect to strike it rich every time, so I will not be disappointed if I don't get but a few dollars; but I've got to collect the toll sometimes, and people musn't expect to ride over this road all the time without paying for it."

"Jest you say to your passengers that the toll-gatherer has come, and if they are wise enuff not ter be ugly about the thing we will not have any trouble."

"Oh, yes, I will explain," the stage driver responded.

CHAPTER III.

A SURPRISE.

And Skinny did explain, but as the passengers had overheard every word of the conversation, explanation was not necessary.

"I have got too much sense to try any funny business with a road-agent," Bickerstaff declared, "so you can tell the gentleman that we hav'n't any idea of making trouble; but explain to him that there is a lady in the stage."

"You need not be alarmed, miss, about his hurting you," he hastened to say to the girl. "Men who follow this line of business never resort to violence unless resistance is offered, and you can bet that I am not fool enough to try that game."

"Oh, I am not at all frightened," the girl responded, in the most matter-of-fact way, and she smiled pleasantly as she spoke.

Bickerstaff was surprised, for he had anticipated that the lady would be dreadfully frightened, and he immediately made up his mind that she was a courageous girl.

"Thar are only two passengers in the hearse, as I told ye," the driver said to the road-agent as the outlaw came forward; "and I don't reckon you will make a fortune out of the raffle, for one on 'em is a gal, and women never carry much cash at any time, and the other pilgrim

ain't carrying no gold mine 'round with him, to judge from his looks."

"Oh, you have a lady on board?" the outlaw exclaimed.

"That's what I said," Skinny Jake answered.

"I will have to do the thing up in first-class style, then, for I pride myself upon being a reg'lar dude among the ladies."

"Just you give her my compliments, and tell her not to be skeered, for thar ain't any danger of her gitting hurt if the man with her has got sense enough not to try to kick up a row."

Bickerstaff at once stuck his head out of the coach window.

"I don't intend to make any trouble, Mr. Road-Agent," he assured. "I have been in little affairs of this kind before, and I understand that a man don't stand no show if he attempts to fight."

"Right you are!" the outlaw asserted. "Your head is level, and no mistake."

The road-agent approached the coach window as he spoke.

Miss Lawrence looked out, evidently curious to see what the outlaw was like.

The footpad made her a polite bow.

"Glad to meet you, miss," he saluted. "I hope I see you well. You mustn't mind a little thing of this kind, you know, for it is one of the customs of this hyer country, so don't git skeered."

"I am not easily alarmed, sir," Miss Lawrence replied, with a smile. "But I am afraid you will be disappointed in regard to the amount of wealth to be obtained from me, for I really hav'n't but about a dollar."

"Perhaps, though, you are gallant enough to allow ladies to pass without exacting toll," she added, with a charming smile.

"Wal, miss, I would like to let you go through all right, but times are so bad that I can't really afford such a luxury," the outlaw averred.

"But my single dollar will not make you very rich," the girl intimated.

"Ah, yes, but mebbe you are trying to play some little game on me," the outlaw insinuated.

"Most pilgrims, when they are called upon to pay toll allers put on a poor mouth and swear that they are clean bu'sted, but when they come to shell out their wealth, very often the discovery is made that they have got a heap sight more than they thought."

"I assure you, sir, you will not find that to be the case with me," the girl declared.

"I will have to plead poverty, too," Bickerstaff added, "for I have only got a couple of dollars in my pocket."

"You see, the fact is, I sat in a leetle game last night and these Silver City sharps were a deal too keen for me."

"It appears that I have struck a bad streak of luck hyer, then," the road-agent observed. "But whose trunk is that on the back of the hack?" the outlaw asked abruptly, casting an inquisitive glance at Miss Lawrence's diminutive piece of baggage.

"It is mine," the girl confessed.

"Do you carry your valuable jewelry in it?"

"The pair of earrings which I wear and this breastpin is all I have in the way of jewelry," Miss Lawrence replied.

"I reckon a man would have a difficulty in raising any ducats on that trunk," the road-agent declared, contemptuously.

"That is correct. The clothes in there are not valuable," the girl assented.

"Wa-al, I will have to trouble you to get out, so I can get a chance to see what you have got. Be lively, now!"

"Certainly, certainly," and Bickerstaff leaped from the hack.

"Are you heeled?" the road-agent asked, with a suspicious glance.

"No; I put all my weapons up in the poker game last night, and the Silver City sharps corralled the hull of them," Bickerstaff avowed, "and if I hadn't met a friend this morning who lent me a few dollars, I wouldn't have been able to get out of the blamed town."

"I am sorry for you, and I would let you go through this time, without making

you pony up, if I wasn't so durned short," the road-agent averred; "but as it is you must shell out."

"All right! It is your say-so, and if you say come down, come down it is," and Bickerstaff handed over a couple of silver dollars.

"No watch?"

"The Silver City sharps have got it."

"Now you jest waltz over to that big pine," and the road-agent pointed to a tree which grew by the edge of the trail about fifty feet in the rear of the stage, "and wait there until I call you."

"All right!" And off Bickerstaff went.

"Now, miss, if you will have the kindness to hop out," and the road-agent, in a gallant manner, extended his left hand—the revolver was in his right—to assist Miss Lawrence to descend.

The girl did hop out, but no sooner did her feet touch the earth than she made a grab at the outlaw's pistol, and succeeded in wresting it from the astounded man's grip.

Then she hit him a lick over the head with the butt of the weapon, and down he went, knocked insensible by the blow.

"Hooray!" yelled the driver, in delight.

"I am not going to be robbed by any such ruffian as this if I can help myself," the girl declared.

"A regular screamer, and no mistake, you be!" Skinny Jake exclaimed.

CHAPTER IV.

A BAFFLED BRIGAND.

"But, now that I have secured the man, what am I going to do with him?"

Bickerstaff now came running up, evidently greatly excited.

"Oh, what did you want to do that for?" he demanded. "Now we will all be murdered!"

"Murdered? I have got the man's revolver, and if he shows fight I will use it."

"But, miss, these fellows always travel in gangs, you know, and when the others find out how this man was assaulted, we will all be murdered," Bickerstaff asserted.

"Not much danger of that," the girl replied, not in the least alarmed. "There is no gang around now, and in my opinion the man is alone."

"Let us get into the coach and drive off before he recovers, then we will be on the safe side," Bickerstaff urged.

"Oh, no; I am going to take this fellow along!" Miss Lawrence assured, determinedly.

Both men looked at her in surprise.

"You don't mean it?" Bickerstaff exclaimed.

"Yes, I do. I have captured the man, and I am going to take him to the mining camp and there turn him over to the proper authorities, so that he may be punished. No doubt the miners will be glad to get hold of him, for I suppose he has committed a dozen crimes of this kind."

"This is the first time I ever heard of a road-agent on this trail, eh, Skinny?" Bickerstaff queried.

"That's correct!" the driver assented. "I have never heard of one since I have been in this section of the country."

"Well, so much the more reason, then, why I should hand him over to the miners, for if the first road-agent who tries to hold up people on this trail is caught, it will be a warning to everybody that it isn't a safe game to try," was the girl's assurance.

"Let me see, now; I must bind this fellow in some way!" And as she spoke, she produced her handkerchief, and with it bound the wrists of the senseless outlaw firmly together, then removed the other revolver which he wore in a holster in his belt, together with the knife in the sheath by the side of the pistol.

"Now I will see what the man looks like," and as she spoke she removed the mask.

The features of a man of twenty-eight or thereabouts were revealed. A dark mustache shaded his lips, and his dark complexion indicated that he was a foreigner.

The driver had surveyed the unmasking of the man with a great deal of curiosity.

"Do you know him?" the girl asked.

"No; I never set eyes on him afore, but I should say that he was a Mexican," was Skinny Jake's opinion.

By this time the shock which the outlaw had received was beginning to pass away, for he opened his eyes, and looked in a vacant way around him; then he rose slowly to a sitting position, glanced at his wrists, and the sight of the bandage revealed to him what had happened.

He scowled at the girl and cried:

"I will have your heart's blood for this, unless you immediately release me!"

"Oh, no! I could not think of doing anything of the kind," the girl replied, coolly. "I am going to carry you to the mining camp and deliver you up to the authorities there, and don't doubt they will teach you the lesson that the way of the transgressor is hard."

"What do you want to do that for?" the outlaw demanded, angrily. "What difference does it make to you whether I am punished by the authorities or not? You have got the best of this thing, hav'n't you? Why aren't you satisfied, then, to let up on me? Let me go, and I will give you my word that I will never trouble you again."

"No; I have succeeded in capturing you, and the proper thing for me to do is to carry you to Bearopolis," Miss Lawrence replied, with firm determination.

"There is no certainty that I will be punished if you do turn me over to the miners," the outlaw argued. "That's many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know, and if you do try to get me punished you can bet your life I will get square with you for it; but if you will agree to let me go now, I will give you my word that I will never trouble you again in any way, and if the chance to do you a good turn ever comes in my way I will do what I can for you."

"That is a mighty fair offer, it seems to me, miss," Bickerstaff interposed, "and if I was you I would take it. Wouldn't you, Skinny?" he asked of the driver.

That worthy shook his head with great deliberation.

"This hyer thing ain't any of my funeral, and I don't reckon that I ought for to put my oar into it, so nary bit of advise will I give."

"You will have to get into the coach and come along to the camp," the girl announced. "As I have made up my mind to take you to Bearopolis, you will have to go, so into the stage with you!"

As the outlaw rose slowly to his feet the sound of horse's hoof-beats came to the ears of the party.

Horsemen were coming up the trail.

More and more distinct grew the sounds, and with them the clang of metal upon metal.

"It's the sodgers!" Skinny Jake cried, after listening intently to the sounds for a few moments.

This was the truth, for soon around a bend in the trail came a small squad of United States troops.

An officer rode at the head of the party, and following him came six cavalrymen.

"It is Captain Lafayette McIntyre, of Fort Bayard," Skinny Jake announced.

The bend in the road was so abrupt that the soldiers were within fifty feet of the hack before they were aware of its presence.

So it was only a few moments from the time of the soldiers' appearance until they drew rein by the side of the stage.

The newcomers gazed in astonishment at the strange sight.

Captain McIntyre was a man of forty—a handsome, dashing fellow, with gray-blue eyes, and blond hair which curled in little ringlets all over his well-shaped head.

"Hello! hello! What does this mean?" the officer demanded, as he pulled his mettlesome steed to a halt.

"This hyer young lady has captured a road-agent, captain," the driver explained.

"Is it possible?" gazing upon the resolute Miss Lawrence with admiring eyes.

"True as preaching!" Skinny Jake affirmed. "He tried for to hold up the hearse, but this hyer young lady was smart enuff for to git the bulge on him, and now she is reckoning for to carry him to Bearopolis

so as to give him into the hands of the authorities."

"I must congratulate you, miss, upon the courage and adroitness which you have displayed," and removing his hat, the captain made a polite bow to Miss Lawrence, which she acknowledged in a suitable manner.

"But the man ought not to be carried to Bearopolis," he explained. "There is no one there with authority to receive and hold him. At Silver City, though, he can be taken care of in the proper manner."

"But the stage is going to the mining camp and not to Silver City," the girl urged.

"I can arrange the matter all right. Turn the man over to me, and I will have him sent under guard to Silver City," the captain volunteered.

"That will be a heap sight the best way to arrange it," the driver declared. "I didn't think of it afore, but the captain is right—thar ain't any jail or officers at Bearopolis."

"I am much obliged to you, sir, for your offer," Miss Lawrence remarked. "The man is a desperado, and therefore ought to be placed in safe keeping."

"My men will attend to it," the captain assured.

Then he dismounted.

"Sergeant, you can mount the man on my horse and convey him to the sheriff at Silver City. Explain to the sheriff about the matter, and tell him that I instructed you to deliver the man to him for safe keeping."

"I will proceed in the coach to Bearopolis, and after you deliver the prisoner, send one of the men over with my horse."

"Yes, sir," responded the sergeant.

Then the road-agent was placed upon the captain's horse, a proceeding which he greatly resented, as the ugly scowl denoted, but as he was powerless to help himself, he did not attempt to even utter a remonstrance.

Of course it would only be a waste of breath, and so he wisely held his tongue.

The soldiers departed with the road-agent.

The captain watched them until they disappeared around the bend of the trail, and then he made the remark that it was a wonder the man had been taken off his guard.

"It was this hyer young lady who did the trick," Skinny Jake exclaimed, delightedly.

"I suppose I took an unfair advantage of him," Miss Lawrence explained, with a laugh, "for he had no idea a woman would dare to attack him, and so was taken completely off his guard."

"It was a plucky act on your part," the captain declared, with an admiring glance. "And I am glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

Miss Lawrence smiled, and then all entered the hack, which proceeded on its way.

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEL IDEA.

Captain McIntyre did his best during the journey to the mining camp to make himself agreeable to the young lady, and it was evident that he had taken a decided fancy for Miss Lawrence.

The young lady did not act, though, as if she was conscious of this fact, but chatted with the officer as freely as though he had been an old acquaintance.

And when the captain happened to remark that it was quite an undertaking for a young lady to make such a journey alone, she explained frankly how it was she came to visit the mining camp.

"James Lawrence?" the captain repeated. "The name is not familiar to me, and yet I am pretty well acquainted with most of the people who live in Bearopolis."

"My uncle is a newcomer," the young lady explained. "And possibly he has not yet arrived at the camp. I shall know, however, as soon as I arrive, for if uncle has not come I will find a letter at the post office telling me just what to do."

"Ah, yes, I see," the captain assented; "but in case your uncle has not arrived,

you will need some place to stop until he does come."

"This gentleman has volunteered to look out for me," and the lady nodded to Bickerstaff as she spoke.

The captain glanced at Sandy in such a peculiar way that he looked uncomfortable.

"Hem! I don't want to appear officious," the officer added, "but I would suggest that the hotel would be the best place for you to go."

"There is only one in the town—the American House. It is kept by an honest Dutchman, Fritz Hauser by name, and he and his wife, Mother Hauser, as almost everybody calls her, will do all in their power to make you comfortable."

"Yes, I was going to recommend the young lady to stop at the hotel," Bickerstaff hastened to say.

"That is certainly the best place," the captain advised. "I am on good terms with the Dutchman and his wife, and when I tell them that they must take all possible care of you until your uncle comes, if he is not already in the town, you may be sure they will do everything in their power to make you comfortable."

The lady thanked the officer for his kindness in suitable terms.

In due time the stage arrived at Bearopolis, and drew up at the hotel.

Captain McIntyre escorted Miss Lawrence into the house, and introduced her to the landlord and his wife.

The worthy Dutchman and his Frau promised to do all they could to make the lady comfortable.

"I must go to the post office, for there is probably a letter there for me," Miss Lawrence at once announced.

The captain volunteered to accompany her.

The post office was only three houses away, located in the largest general store of the camp.

There were no letters, and Miss Lawrence expressed herself as being much disappointed.

"The letter may arrive on the next stage," the captain suggested, as the pair left the post office to return to the hotel.

"Yes, it may come, but I have serious doubts about the matter," Miss Lawrence replied. "I am beginning to believe that some accident must have happened to my uncle, for he wrote me that he would either be in Bearopolis to receive me, or else I would positively find a letter here if he was detained."

"Now, he is not here, nor is there a letter, and I am much afraid that something is wrong."

"Business may have detained him, and then, too, you must bear in mind that the mails are very uncertain and irregular out in this wilderness," the captain urged.

"Yes, I suppose so, but I am much afraid that everything is not right."

"Well, if I can be of any assistance, pray do not hesitate to call upon me," the officer enjoined.

The girl thanked the gentleman for his kind offer.

By this time they had arrived at the hotel, and Miss Lawrence immediately went up-stairs to her room, where her trunk had been conveyed.

The landlady came in to see if she could do anything for her guest. She found Miss Lawrence engaged in hunting through the tray of her trunk, and was considerably surprised when the girl produced a complete shaving outfit!

"Mine gootness!" exclaimed the hostess, in amazement, "what for you have dot?"

The young woman laughed.

"I will have to make a clean breast of it, I suppose, Mrs. Hauser," she answered. "The fact is, I am unfortunate enough to have a horrid mustache, so that I have to shave just like a man!"

"Vell! vell! I never heard tell of anything like dot before," the old woman exclaimed, very much astonished.

"It is an awful nuisance," the girl averred. "But if I didn't shave I would have a regular mustache, and as a woman can't very well go to a barber I am compelled to shave myself. Just think now what an amount of talk it would create if

I should walk into the barber's shop in this town and announce that I had come to be shaved."

"Oh, mine gootness! De mans would think dot you vas crazy."

"I don't doubt it."

"But you could not go to dot barber shop in der camp, for dere is no barber shop at all," Mrs. Hauser remarked, in her peculiar matter-of-fact way.

"No barber shop, eh?"

"Nein!"

"All the men have to shave themselves?"

"Ya, ya!"

"Why, the camp is away behind the age."

"Dot is vot mine husband says, and he has told plenty of mans dot if a barber was to come into dis town he would have plenty monish to make."

"I do not doubt it," the girl replied, and then, as an idea suddenly flashed into her mind, she exclaimed:

"Why wouldn't it be a good idea for me to set up a barber shop?"

"Eh? Vot is dot?" Mrs. Hauser demanded, in amazement.

"I say, why wouldn't it be a good idea for me to start a barber shop," Miss Lawrence repeated. "As there isn't any in the town, I should judge that there is a grand opening for one."

"I am situated in a very perilous position, now, Mrs. Hauser," the girl explained. "My uncle is not here nor have I received any word from him."

"Now, supposing that any accident has happened to him—supposing that he does not come to Bearopolis at all, what is going to become of me? How am I to live?"

"Mine gootness! I do not know!" the landlady replied, perplexed.

"I have got to get my honest living in some way, for I have not money enough to keep me very long, and it seems to me that I could make a living easier in this way than in any other that I know of just at present."

"But, a female barber!" Mrs. Hauser protested. "I never heard of such a thing as dot!"

"Oh, yes, there have been a number of female barbers, but they are not common, of course, and in the fact that such a thing is a novelty lies the attraction," the girl explained.

"Ya, dot vas so!"

"Now, supposing I can get a little shop in the camp here somewhere, and start in the barber line, don't you suppose I could do a good business?"

"Oh, ya!" the old Dutchwoman asserted. "I think there would be plenty of mans come to you to get shave. Plenty!"

"Exactly. And the news that a woman barber had set up a shop in the camp would soon be heralded far and wide. Why, the very novelty of the thing would attract customers from far and near!"

"Ya, mine dear, but there are some very bad mans in dis camp, and you might have troubles mit dem."

"Oh, no; I am not at all afraid of that," the girl assured. "I am one of the kind of women who know how to take care of themselves."

"Suppose any ruffian should come in my shop and attempt to boss things, how long would he stay there, would you think, if I went at him with an open razor in my hand?"

"Mine gootness! you vould not do dot?" Mrs. Hauser exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I would, and without the least hesitation, too," Miss Lawrence replied, decidedly.

"As I told you, I am just the kind of girl who can take care of herself, and in this emergency, thrown as I am upon my own resources, I must do something, and as at present I don't see anything which promises as well as this barber shop idea. I think I'll adopt it."

"Vell, my dear, I s'pose you would hafe plenty of customers."

"I think so, and as I am used to handling a razor, it would not take me long to become expert enough to give satisfaction to my customers. I suppose the first dozen or two might have just cause to

complain that I was not so expert a shaver as I ought to be, but every barber has to learn, and my customers would have to put up with it."

"I never heard of such an idea in mine life," Mrs. Hauser declared, hardly able to believe that the girl could be in earnest.

But she was in dead earnest, for the landlady was asked to summon the landlord, so that he could be consulted about the matter.

The worthy Dutchman was as much astonished as his wife had been, but, like her, agreed that there was undoubtedly money in the idea, and volunteered the information that there was a small store down the street, now unoccupied, which could probably be had on reasonable terms.

"It belongs to der boss gambler of der town, Pale Jack Delmaine," he added.

"Good! I will see Mr. Pale Jack as soon as possible," the girl announced.

CHAPTER VI.

PALE JACK.

"You can see him all right, and as soon as you like," the landlord responded.

"The quicker the better," Miss Lawrence avowed.

"You come mit me, then," the Dutchman responded.

The girl got her hat and coat, and the two passed down the stairs together.

After they got into the street an idea occurred to the landlord.

"I did not think of dot," he observed, abruptly.

"Think of what?" the girl asked.

"Pale Jack is a gambler, and he keeps a saloon where der boys drink and gamble," Mr. Hauser explained.

"Mebbe you would not like dot saloon to go in mit yourself."

"We can arrange that easily enough," the girl assumed, her ready wit evidently seeing a way out of the difficulty.

"I will wait in the street and you can call the gentleman out."

"Dot vas so," the old Dutchman assented, with a beaming smile.

"I did not think me of dot."

The pair did not have far to go, for the saloon they sought was only a hundred yards away.

It was the crack place of the town.

Like the majority of the buildings in the camp, it was only one story high, with a blazing red front, and an elaborate sign, which extended across the entire building, which announced that it was the "Red Front Palace."

"You will find dot Pale Jack to be a nice mans, although he is der boss gambler of der town," the landlord informed.

"Yes, I believe, as a rule, that these first-class sports are generally pretty decent sort of chaps," the girl assumed.

"Dot is der empty store," and Hauser pointed to a small one-story building next door to the Red Front Palace.

It was only about twelve feet square, with a single small show window.

There was no furniture within, although on the walls were a number of shelves.

The girl peered in through the window.

"It will do very nicely if I can only get it," she remarked.

"I do not think there will be any difficulty about dot," the landlord thought.

"Der store is empty, and, as it is not big enough for any business dot amounts to anything, it is not an easy matter for der owner to rent it, but I vill soon find out all der matter about. You wait for me here a leetle while."

Miss Lawrence nodded assent, then the landlord went into the saloon and was met almost on the threshold by the owner of the place.

Jack Delmaine was a fine type of the first-class frontier sport.

He was a muscularly built fellow, a little above the medium height, with regular features, strongly marked; he had jet black eyes and crispy, curling hair of the same hue; a luxuriant mustache, also of inky blackness, shaded his firm-set, resolute mouth.

His face was naturally colorless, and the contrast with his dark hair, mustache and

eyes, gave his complexion an unusual pallor, so it was not strange that in a land where almost every other man had a nickname the inhabitants should fasten such an appellation as Pale Jack upon him.

The gambler was dressed in a picturesque fashion.

He wore a loose sack coat of black velvet and pantaloons of the same material; no vest, so that his elaborately ruffled shirt could be plainly seen. Around his neck, under a broad collar, he wore a flowing black silk necktie, knotted loosely after the sailor fashion.

So that, take him all in all, Pale Jack presented a decidedly striking appearance.

He had been sitting by the window, reading a newspaper, when the pair came along, and as the screens which guarded the casements were so arranged that, although those in the street could not see into the saloon, yet those within could see out, he had noticed the two.

"How you vas, Mr. Delmaine?" accosted the honest Dutchman, in his genial way.

"Pretty well, I thank you. How do you find yourself?" the gambler returned.

"Vell, I vas able to be up and I don't miss no meals," the landlord assured, with a grin. "But I vas come to see you on a business matter."

"All right; fire away."

"It vas about your store next door. Vas it for rent?"

"It is."

"I have a young woman outside who would like to take it."

"She is a stranger?" the gambler queried, with a critical glance through the window at the girl.

"Yes; she vas just come to the camp."

"And what kind of a shebang does she think of running?"

"A barber shop."

"A what?" exclaimed Pale Jack, in great surprise.

"A barber shop; and it vas a great idea, you bet!" the old Dutchman declared.

"Well, there is certainly an opening for a barber shop in town, for there isn't anything of the kind in the camp, and I know there are a lot of men who are like myself on the shaving question. I can shave myself all right, but I hate to do it, and would much rather pay somebody else to attend to the matter."

"Dot vas so," Hauser assented. "I am in dot same boat, mineself."

"But has she brought a barber to the town with her to do the shaving?"

"Oh, no! She is going to do it herself."

"What! a female barber?"

"Dot vas so!" and the old Dutchman grinned.

"Well, well, that certainly is a novelty."

"I think it will catch der boys, and she will make plenty of monish."

"Very likely. Well, I will go and have a talk with the lady, and I don't doubt that we can arrange the matter all right."

"Yes. Come mit me and I will introduce you."

The gambler donned his broad-brimmed white felt hat and followed the Dutchman to the street, where he was introduced to Miss Lawrence.

"This gentleman tells me that you want to rent my little store," the gambler said, scrutinizing the girl with a critical eye.

"Yes, sir. Did he explain what I wanted it for?" Miss Lawrence asked, bearing the scrutiny without flinching.

"He did, and I must say that I am surprised, for the idea is certainly a novel one," Pale Jack admitted.

"I am aware of that fact, but I am so situated that it is the best thing I can do," and the girl then explained to the gentleman the circumstances of the case.

Pale Jack listened with the utmost attention, evidently much interested.

"Well, miss, I think you are wise to fry and do something for yourself, for there is no telling when your uncle will come, for I regard it as a very bad sign that you have not heard anything from him at all."

"Yes, so do I."

"Come in and take a look at the place," invited the gambler. "It is not very large, but you do not require much room."

Pale Jack unlocked the door and conducted the two into the little room.

Miss Lawrence, after taking a look around, remarked that she thought it would suit admirably.

"And now comes the question—how cheap can you afford to let me have it?" she asked.

"You mustn't put the price too high, you know, for the enterprise is an uncertain one, and there is no telling how it will turn out."

"Yes, I am aware of that; in fact, as the old saying goes, there isn't much of anything certain in this world but death and taxes," the gambler assumed, smilingly. "But I will not drive a hard bargain with you, for as you are placed in such a peculiar position, I am anxious to do all I can to help you along."

"The shop isn't of much use to me, or anybody else, on account of its being so small, and as it does not stand me in much money, I can afford to be liberal with any one who wants it."

"It was originally built by a shoemaker, an Irishman, who would undoubtedly have done a good business if he had attended to his work and let liquor and gambling alone; but he wouldn't do that, so at last he was forced to give up."

"He came to me, and I bought the outfit in order to help him get out of the town. He owed me quite a little sum of borrowed money, and it was the only way I could see to get square."

"Really, though, it was throwing good money after bad, for I have never got anything to amount to anything out of the place."

"Now, let me see. You will need some chairs and a table, and, by the way, I have a large mirror which will be just the thing for you. Then I have a couple of shaving cups, too, and a hot-water urn which I got so as to be able to serve hot drinks in the winter time. It isn't of any use to me now, and you can have it just as well as not."

"You are very kind, indeed," the girl exclaimed, gratefully.

"Don't mention it, I beg," Pale Jack responded, with a bow.

"But, how about your razors?"

"I have a half a dozen."

"Oh, then you are all right! The barber chair is the puzzle, but by taking an ordinary chair and fixing a head-rest on it we can make it answer."

"Dot vill be bully!" the old Dutchman ejaculated.

"And as far as the rent goes, I will tell you what I will do: For the first month I will give you the shop rent free, provided you shave me twice a week; after that time you will know what business you are doing, and can tell just how much you can afford to pay."

"I will accept the offer, and am very much obliged to you, sir, for your liberality," the girl responded.

"Oh, that is all right; that is what we are in the world for," Pale Jack averred.

"One of the hangers-on of my place is a handy man with the brush, and I will have him fix a barber's pole and a sign for you, and by to-morrow everything will be ready."

"Thanks!" Miss Lawrence had to say.

"Many thanks."

And this ended the interview.

CHAPTER VII.

ASTONISHING THE CAMP.

The gambler was an energetic fellow and at once proceeded to get the shop in readiness.

The moment he began operations the attention of the passers-by was attracted, and great was the astonishment when Pale Jack told the questioners that a female barber was about to set up a shop in Bearopolis.

It did not take long for the news to travel, and in a few hours not only did all the camp know of the prospective venture, but the tidings had traveled to many of the mountain gulches, and that night when the miners came flocking into the town the female barber was the general topic of conversation.

In the morning, about seven o'clock, when Miss Lawrence came to open the shop she found a curious knot of people assembled.

Pale Jack was on hand to greet her, although it was something of an effort for a man to get up before seven who seldom went to bed until three in the morning.

He unlocked the door, conducted the lady into the shop, and then gave her a metal whistle.

"I don't think that you will be apt to have any trouble with any one," he said, "for as a rule the men on the frontier of civilization, although they may appear to be rough and uncouth, yet, as a rule, they have a high respect for women."

"Still, it is always well to be on the safe side, so I got this whistle for you. If anybody shows a disposition to be ugly and kick up a disturbance, just sound the whistle and I will be on hand in a twinkling."

"I don't set myself up to be a great warrior or anything of that sort, but since I have come to this town I have always been able to hold my own, and the community at large have got the idea that I am a tough man to buck against."

"I am very much obliged to you, indeed, for your kindness," the girl responded. "But I don't really think that I will have any trouble, for I have always been able to look out for myself."

"Well, I hope not," Pale Jack observed. "The only danger is that some drunken fellow may wander into town and think that it will be a rare bit of sport for him to kick up a row in a woman's shop, but it may not occur."

Then the gambler departed.

As soon as the girl arranged matters to her satisfaction she threw open the door and the customers began to flock in.

She hadn't had a great deal of experience in the shaving line, but as she possessed the light touch and dexterity common to womankind, coupled with the strength of a man, she succeeded tolerably well.

The customers were satisfied, and paid without grumbling.

The greatest trouble was that the majority of the men wanted to stop and converse with her after getting shaved, but she resolutely set her face against this, saying, with a smile:

"You really must excuse me, gentlemen, but I can't spare the time to talk in business hours."

"Come down to the hotel after supper to-night. I will be in the parlor and will be pleased to converse with you to your heart's content."

Until about ten o'clock the girl was kept busy, and then there was a lull.

"I am glad of it," Mignon murmured, as the last customer departed.

"I had no idea that shaving was such hard work, but I will get used to it in time, I suppose, and then it will be comparatively easy."

Pale Jack made his appearance as she finished the sentence.

"How do you get along?" he asked.

"All right, a little tired because I am not used to it, but that will pass away in time."

"I thought I would trouble you for a shave, but if you are tired—"

"Oh, no; not so tired as not to be able to work," the girl declared. "Take a seat and I will attend to you."

At this point the door flew open and a big burly fellow strode into the room.

He was dressed like a miner, in dirty flannel shirt, rough woolen pantaloons, which were tucked into a pair of muddy boots, a fearfully battered-up slouch hat, a rough handkerchief knotted around his neck.

Around his waist was a leather belt, and in it was thrust a big revolver.

"Durn my cats if I ever heered tell of sich a lay-out as this in all my born days!" he exclaimed, banging the door behind him with great violence, putting his hands on his hips, and staring around him with a countenance expressive of great astonishment.

"A female barber! A she-shaver!" he continued.

"Wa-al, now, if this hyer don't beat my time I don't want a cent!"

The man was a stranger.

Pale Jack knew everybody in the camp and around it for a dozen miles, and at the first glance he saw that he had never encountered this fellow before.

From the peculiar look on the man's face he concluded, too, that he was in liquor, and so he was glad that he happened to be in the shop when the man made his appearance.

"I didn't believe when a galoot in a saloon down the street let on to me that thar was a she-male barber in the town."

"Go 'way with yer—what are you a-giving," I said to the cuss instant, and I reckon that I would have whaled him for a liar if he hadn't got up and dusted.

"But the cuss w'ot run the shebang said that it was a sure enuff fact, and so I came down to see the show."

"Well, sir, it is the truth. I have set up a barber shop here, and I am the barber," the girl remarked.

"Honest Injun? Wish you may die if the thing aint' so?" the big fellow exclaimed.

"It is correct, sir," Mignon replied.

"Wa-al, now, I reckon this hyer beat anything that I ever heered tell on in my time, and I have seen and heered of a heap of queer things, too, you kin bet your life, for I am one of the old original rustlers, I am."

"I reckon that you don't know me," the man exclaimed, abruptly.

"No, sir, I do not; I never had the pleasure of making your acquaintance," the girl answered.

"Wa-al, sissy, you kin bet your boots that I am one of the biggest men in this hyer section!" the stranger declared, in a boastful way.

"Of course, 'tain't anything wonderful that I ain't known in this hyer town, for this is the fust time I ever struck this camp, but you kin be safe in going your bottom dollar that the people hyer will know all about me in a mighty short time, for that is the kind of a rooster I am."

"My name is Billy Murphy, and I am the big chief of Pinos Altos!"

Then the big fellow stuck his hands on his hips again and glared around him in a lordly way.

"You have heered of Pinos Altos, of course!" he remarked, after a moment's pause.

"That ar' town is jest a leetle the liveliest burg in this hyer deestricht."

"It lays away over all the rest of the roosting places of mankind in this hyer neighborhood, and when I am to home I am the boss of the town."

"But I want you to understand that I ain't no Irishman, if I am carrying 'round the handle of Murphy."

"That is jest some kind of an accident, somehow, 'cos thar isn't anything of the Paddy Whack about me. I am a full-blooded native American, from the soles of my feet to the crown of my head, and the man who says I ain't will have the biggest kind of a fight on his hands instant."

"Do you wish to be shaved, sir?" with a glance at the bristle-like beard and mustache of the stranger.

"Wa-al, I dunno 'bout getting shaved, 'cos I reckon that this ar' beard kinder adds to my beauty," Murphy remarked, with a prodigious grin.

"But I don't mind gitting the ha'r trimmed up and titivated a bit."

"Have the kindness to take a seat then, and as soon as I get through with this gentleman," and the girl nodded to Pale Jack, "I will attend to you."

"W'ot's that?" cried the big fellow, with an ugly scowl at the gambler.

"Have I got to wait for this hyer dandy galoot?"

"See hyer, my man, you had better keep a civil tongue in your head if you don't want to get into trouble!" Pale Jack exclaimed.

The gambler was not the sort of man to stand any nonsense from a fellow of this kind.

"Git into trouble!" Murphy roared, and then, with a sudden motion he whipped a big revolver from his belt and leveled it at the sport.

As a rule it was not an easy matter for anybody to get "the drop" on so old a stager as Pale Jack, but on this occasion he was taken by surprise, for he had no idea that the man meditated anything of the kind.

"Now, then, I reckon, mister man, that I have got you whar' the ha'r is short!" the big fellow exclaimed, exultingly.

"Well, well, you are certainly remarkably quick on the draw!" Pale Jack observed, in a surprised tone, but not manifesting any particular alarm.

"You jest bet I am!" Murphy responded. "And that is the kind of ha'r-pin I am."

"I am all wool and a yard wide, you bet your boots, and the man who undertakes to clime me will have to rise early in the morning."

"I'm a bad man from Bitter Creek, you understand, a tough old rooster for any galoot to chew, and when I start in on a thing of this kind I always calculate to have all the advantage on my side."

"Well, I suppose I will have to admit that you have succeeded in getting decidedly the best of the situation, but then, you see, I am unarmed," Pale Jack remarked, thrusting his hands in his coat pockets as he spoke and lifting the skirts of his coat so as to show that he did not wear any revolvers belted to his waist.

"Yas, I see, but then you hadn't ought to be so durned cheeky in shooting off yer mouth," the big fellow remarked, with the air of a philosopher.

"When men ain't heeled, you know, ready for the biggest kind of a war, then they ought to be mighty keeful how they carry sail."

"You don't ketch a man like me making any mistake of that kind."

"No, siree, you kin bet high on that!" he added, emphatically.

"I am jest the kind of a rooster to lay low and say nothing when I ain't all primed for war."

"Oh, no; you kin jest bet all you are worth that no galoot ever gits me in a tight place," he blustered.

CHAPTER VIII.

MURPHY WANTS A CHANCE.

Hardly had the words left his lips when Pale Jack made a move which fairly caused the big fellow's eyes to bulge with amazement.

The sport had his hands in his coat pockets, and he drew them out quickly.

In each hand was an old-fashioned single-barreled pistol, and these pistols he leveled full at the breast of Billy Murphy.

The hammers were up, and as the man from Pinos Altos did not anticipate that the gambler would try any game of this kind, he had, in a careless way, allowed the muzzle of his revolver to point toward the ceiling instead of keeping his man covered.

In the beginning he had succeeded in getting the drop on Pale Jack, taking him by surprise, but now the gambler had turned the tables on him with a vengeance.

Murphy started in surprise, for never was there a man taken more completely at a disadvantage. Then, too, the girl seized upon the opportunity to grasp an open razor which lay upon the table convenient to her hand.

"Now, then, oblige me by handing that weapon over to the young lady, or I shall be forced to drill a couple of holes through your carcass!" Pale Jack exclaimed.

"Wa-al, durn me!" the big fellow ejaculated, so completely amazed that he was at a loss for words.

"Don't waste any time," the sport commanded. "Come right down to business, now! Get a move on you as soon as you can! Life is short and time is flying."

"Miss, take the revolver!"

Mignon obeyed the injunction, but Murphy reluctantly yielded the weapon.

He would not have done it could he have seen any way to avoid complying with the command, but he did not.

He relieved his mind by indulging in a growl.

"I reckon you have got me foul this time," Murphy exclaimed, "but you kin bet yet bottom dollar that you won't never ketch me in this way again, and I give ye fair warning now that you had better go slow, 'cos I will have it in for you and I will make it mighty warm for a man about your size the next time we meet."

Then the big fellow stuck his hands on his hips, puffed out his cheeks, and scowled at the sport.

"You are a big bag of wind!" Pale Jack cried, contemptuously.

The man from Pinos Altos was so astounded and disgusted by this direct insult that it was a few moments before he could speak.

"Jumping Jerusalem!" he fairly howled, "w'ot do you say? Kin I believe me ears?"

"Well, they ought to be able to give you good service, for they are large enough—too large, in fact, for a human being, and not quite big enough for a jackass," the sport retorted.

This insult infuriated the other.

"You don't dar' to gin me a chance!" Murphy vociferated, white with rage. "I am a fust class man, I am, if I get any show at all. Come out in the street and gin me a chance at you. Jest gin me half a show and I will whale the day-lights out of you."

"Oho! you have come down from pistols to fists, eh?" the sport queried.

"Well, that is a little more sensible, for if I should upset your apple cart in a revolver fight it would, in all probability, be the last of you, but in a fisticuff match, even if I did boot you all over the town, you wouldn't be much the worse for it in a day or two."

"You boot me all over town?" Murphy echoed.

"That is what I said, and I can do it, too!" Pale Jack retorted.

"Come out into the street and try it on! I dar' you to come out into the street and gin me a chance to chaw you up!" cried the big fellow, dancing up and down in his excitement.

"Go ahead!" the sport responded, "I'm your man!"

"Come on! It won't take me mor'n a min'te to make you wish that you had never been born!" Murphy yelled, as he started for the door.

The loud talking had attracted a curious crowd, who, congregated by the door and window of the barber shop, were gazing in at the three.

So when the pair emerged into the street they found there an audience all prepared to enjoy a show.

Pale Jack replaced his pistols in the pockets of his coat and removed the garment in preparation for the contest.

This delayed him for a few seconds and gave the man from Pinos Altos an opportunity to indulge in a little "blowing," for the edification of the crowd.

Murphy capered around, rolling up the sleeves of his dirty flannel shirt, and waving his big fists in the air.

"Hyer I am, all of me!" he cried. "The bad man from Bitter Creek! The half-hoss, half-alligator from the Pinos Altos range. I'm all pizen from my head to my heels, and the galoot who wades in to tackle me had better make his will and pick out his gravestone afore he goes into the picnic, for he don't stand any chance to do anything arter the ball is over."

And the bully roared this out at the top of his lungs.

"Jest you keep yer eyes on me, feller citizens, and you will see the biggest circus that ever struck this hyer town!"

While Murphy had been amusing himself with his antics, Pale Jack and the female barber had exchanged a few words.

"Just keep your eyes on my coat, please," the sport asked, as he doffed the garment and placed it on the table.

"Not that I value the coat so much, but the pistols in the pockets are a pair of valuable tools, and I would hate to lose them. If I should be unlucky enough to do so I do not know where I would get another pair to match them."

"Make your mind easy about that," the young woman replied. "I will see that no one touches either the coat or the pistols."

"In such a crowd as this there is always sure to be some light-fingered gentleman, eager and anxious to pick up anything which comes in his way," the sport explained.

"I will be careful not to allow anybody to enter the shop until the affair is over," Mignon assured.

"And I fancy, too, that it will not take long for you to polish off this ruffian," she added; "for, unless I have made a great mistake in regard to the man, he is a blowhard, and what he doesn't know about boxing would fill a book."

"That is my impression, and although I am not a champion of champions, yet I know enough about boxing to be able to hold my own with regular professionals who make a living in the prize ring."

"A man in my line of business, you see, has got to be considerable of a fighter or else he would never be able to get along," Pale Jack exclaimed.

"Yes, I understand that."

"We win our money by skill and cunning, but we are often forced to fight to keep our gains, and so it happens that there are mighty few sports who are not able to put up a good battle, no matter how short is the notice and scant the time allowed for preparation."

Then, having finished his preparations, Pale Jack advanced into the street.

By this time there were fully forty people in the neighborhood, for in a mining camp like Bearopolis the citizens dearly love a boxing match.

"Hyer ye ar', at last!" Murphy yelled at the top of his voice, and he brandished his big fists in the air like the sails of a windmill. "Blame me if I ain't clean tired out awaiting for you. I am just eager for to get a chance to smash you as flat as a pancake!"

"Stop your foolishness and come up to the scratch, then!" the sport responded.

"I'm hyer—I'm all hyer, sail in yer elephant!" the big fellow yelled, and then he made a rush at the sport, striking some terrific blows, and if any of them had landed on the person of Pale Jack they undoubtedly would have materially damaged him.

But the sport was too nimble on his feet, too expert a boxer, too good a general to allow the clumsy, over-grown man from Pinos Altos to hit him.

He dodged and ducked, gave way before the attack, and then, just as soon as the big bully halted, winded by his violent exertion, he attacked him with the utmost fury.

Bang! Bang!

Murphy got Pale Jack's right on his jaw and his left just over the belt.

Awful blows they were, too, and the man from Pinos Altos grunted with pain.

Then the pair "mixed it up" for a while, as a pugilist would say.

That is, they were at close quarters, Pale Jack's powerful left getting in some awful thumps on the big blowhard's "bread basket," while Murphy's round arm blows did but little damage to the iron-like head and neck of the sport.

Then there was a clinch; and, though the stranger was apparently the bigger and stronger man, yet Pale Jack got a peculiar crook on him, twisted him off his feet, bringing his antagonist down on his head and shoulders with terrific force.

A yell went up from the crowd upon witnessing the downfall of the big delegate from Pinos Altos, and although, as a rule, the people in the mining towns of the Far West are not inclined to be anywhere as clannish as the denizens of the East, yet the citizens are sure to have a certain amount of local pride, and therefore on this occasion the men of

Bearopolis were disposed to exult over the downfall of the boasting stranger.

Pale Jack was a popular man in the town, and the people were delighted to see that he was a match for the bragging stranger.

CHAPTER IX.

MURPHY IS NOT SATISFIED.

Murphy was terribly shaken up by his fall, and then, too, blows which he had received in his stomach had made him awfully sore.

The man was as fat as a prize hog, and not at all fit to go into a regular pugilistic encounter.

As one of the wits in the crowd remarked, the big fellow had "bellows to mend"—meaning that it was difficult for him to breathe in the very worst kind of way.

Murphy was a bull-headed sort of fellow, and though he had never been handled so roughly before in all his experience, yet he was game enough not to be willing to acknowledge that he was badly beaten.

He had been trounced so severely, though, that it was fully a minute before he rose from the ground.

Then, when he did get up, he was puffing and blowing at a great rate.

The jokers in the crowd had yelled "time" repeatedly, but Murphy had treated the cries with silent contempt, only glaring in an indignant way at the officious speakers.

Slowly he rose to his feet, folded his arms across his breast, and, in an angry way, cried:

"W'ot sort of monkey business do you call this, anyway?"

"I never seed a man fight in this jumping-Jack fashion in my life, and I can jest tell you that I ain't used to it."

"If you would only stand still, I would hammer the life out of you, and not half try, either!"

There was a burst of mocking laughter from the crowd at this boasting announcement.

"Oh, you kin haw, haw! all you like!" Murphy exclaimed.

"I mean it! I mean just w'ot I say, and you kin bet yer life on it."

"I am a fighter, I am—a fighter from Fighterville, but I ain't no acrobat—I ain't no sprinter, so when it comes to a footrace I ain't in it."

"Well, I am at a loss to understand how you want a man to fight," the sport responded.

"It is certain that I didn't take any unfair advantage of you, and I will leave it to the crowd."

There was a general chorus of "No's."

"If you don't know anything about boxing it isn't my fault," Pale Jack remarked.

"As to the monkey, jumping-Jack business, as you are pleased to term it, that is a part of the game, and if you are not up to that sort of work so much the worse for you."

"Yes, yes, it was the finest kind of a fight," one of the bystanders declared.

"Do you call it a fair fight when one galoot punches another in the stomach almost hard enough to make him turn himself inside out," the big delegate cried, indignantly.

There was a yell of laughter from the crowd at this question, for the rage of the man from Pinos Altos was really comical.

"Body blows are fair as long as they are not delivered below the belt," the sport responded.

"That is jest it," Murphy cried, angrily. "All them pokes that you gin me were too low down."

"Nothing of the kind," Pale Jack declared.

"I always make it a rule to fight as square a fight as a man can put up, and I am certain that not a single one of my blows was foul."

"Gol darn it! they were all foul, every one of them!" Murphy retorted, indignantly. "And I kin tell you that I ain't used to no such treatment."

"I kin whale you, I kin, but not if you ar' goin' to poke me in the breadbasket every chance you get."

"Suppose I tie one hand behind me?" the sport suggested, sarcastically.

The crowd indulged in a roar of laughter at the suggestion.

"Or make an agreement with you before we begin that I am not to hit you hard enough to disturb your delicate composure."

Again the bystanders laughed.

"Fix the thing so that you will have all the chances and I will not have any," Pale Jack suggested.

"How will that suit your royal highness? Heads you win—tails I lose?"

"All I want is a fair show!" Murphy growled, with an angry look at the mocking crowd.

"A fair show!" Pale Jack repeated. "Why, man, you have had the squarest kind of a deal!"

"Yes, yes!" chorused the crowd.

"But the truth of the matter is that you are no match for me—you are no match for any man anywhere near your weight, who possesses a knowledge of boxing, for you are a regular greenhorn at that sort of thing."

"You can manage to hold your own in a regular rough-and-tumble, maybe, when your antagonist is a man of about the same caliber as yourself, but if you run up against a fighter who knows something of the art of self-defense you are not in it at all."

"Wal, I never fit in any such monkey way as this, anyhow, and I reckon I don't want no more of it, but I'm a hankering for satisfaction all the same, though."

"You are a wise man not to try any more of this game, for the longer you stand in the worse off you will be," the sport observed. "I would only make a chopping-block out of you."

"But you say that you want satisfaction?"

"You kin bet yer bottom dollar that I do, and I am going to have it, too!" Murphy cried, threateningly.

"That is all right, sir; you are welcome to the best in the shop, as long as I am in the town," Pale Jack responded.

"How will you have it?"

"I am a gen'leman, I am," the big fellow declared, with an angry look at the mocking miners, disregarding the direct question.

"No man ever yet abused me without being called upon to step up to the captain's office and settle!"

"Nominate the precise way in which you want me to accommodate you, and I reckon I will be able to fix you in two ways of a mule's tail," Pale Jack responded, in the gravest possible way, and much to the amusement of the crowd.

"I kin shoot the stuffin' out of you with a revolver," Murphy declared.

"Oh, that is your game, eh?" the sport asked.

"You kin bet high it is," averred the big blusterer. "All I want is a chance at you, and it won't take me long to fix you ready for planting!" Murphy replied.

"Strange as it may appear to you, but I hav'n't as much confidence in your word as I might have," Pale Jack observed in a quizzical way.

"You were going to smash me all to pieces in the boxing match, and without having to more than half try, either, but, some way, you slipped up on it."

"But I won't this time, you bet your life!" Murphy declared.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't dare to bet my life or even any considerable sum of money upon such a mighty risky chance," the sport retorted.

"But I am willing to give you the show which you demand."

"Your revolver is in the barber shop; go in and get it. I will be up the street by that tree," and Pale Jack nodded to a scrub oak on the opposite side of the way.

"It is about a hundred feet away, and is a good distance for men to begin operations in a game of this kind."

"I will give you time to get out in the middle of the street and then we will begin operations."

"Both of us are to be at liberty to advance and fire until one or the other of us is down."

"That is all right," the bully assented. "I don't see no objection to that ar'."

"All that I am looking for is a squar' deal, you understand. I don't want to take no advantages of nobody nohow."

"I am jest the squarest man you ever struck, and I am one of the biggest chiefs that ever hopped into this hyer town."

"You kinder got the best on me in this hyer boxing business, as you savvy the game better than I do, but when it comes to guns, I am the biggest kind of an old war hoss, and don't you forget it!"

"All right!" the sport responded, not at all affected by the boasting of the stranger.

"When we come to try the thing on we will all find out just how big a warrior you are, but I will venture to observe that if you don't make a better show with a gun than you did with your fists, you will never be able to start a private graveyard of your own if you should live to be a thousand years old."

"Oho! I s'pose that you have got one of those things!" Murphy exclaimed, with a sneer.

"Certainly! Of course; and as it happens, there is a vacancy on the end of one of the rows, where you will fit in as snug as a bug in a rug, so trot along in, get your gun, and give me a chance to fit you for planting!"

The crowd laughed, Murphy shook his head in a sort of puzzled way, as if he didn't quite understand the matter, then marched into the shop.

Pale Jack went up the street, drawing his revolver as he proceeded, and clicking the cylinder around so as to be sure that it was in perfect order.

When he arrived at the tree he faced around, ready to meet his adversary.

He did not have long to wait.

In a couple of minutes the man from Pinos Altos made his appearance, flourishing his revolver.

As soon as Murphy appeared in the doorway the crowd scattered, each and every man intent upon getting a good place from whence the fight could be viewed with safety, none of the bystanders being anxious to stop stray balls.

Out into the center of the street went Murphy, swaggering along with an air of bravado, going on the Chinese plan of trying to frighten the enemy before the fight began.

As soon as he got in position, sharp and quick came the question from Pale Jack:

"Are you ready?"

"All ready! Let her go!" Billy Murphy responded, defiantly.

And the sport did "let her go," too, in a way that astounded the man from Pinos Altos, for Jack darted toward him, advancing on the "double-quick," as a military man would say.

This movement took Murphy so completely by surprise that he at once became "rattled," but he opened fire as quickly as possible, and at the same time began to retreat.

The big fellow was not a particularly good shot at any time, therefore, under such circumstances as these it was not strange that all of his bullets should go wide of the mark.

And Murphy was so unnerved that he had fired all of the six shots in his revolver before he was conscious of what he was doing.

Pale Jack, though, knew just what he had done, and as soon as the last shot rang out on the air, the sport cried out:

"One, two, three, four, five, six! Six shots gone! That means that your revolver is empty, and now I will proceed to fill you full of holes!"

At which he darted forward on a run.

By this time the man from Pinos Altos had become so demoralized that all he thought of was how to escape the certain death which threatened him.

With a howl of terror he flung his now useless revolver at the head of the sport, then wheeled and ran at the top of his speed.

The crowd yelled in derision at this exhibition of cowardice, but as soon as Murphy took to his heels the sport halted and sent a shot whizzing close to the head of the runaway.

As he heard the whiz of the bullet, the big fellow gave utterance to another yell of fear, and tried to run faster.

The bystanders were now roaring with laughter.

"Plug him, Jack! plug him!" came from a dozen witnesses of the fun.

"Touch him up in the legs! Shoot a slice out of one of his arms! Cut off a lock of his hair, so we will have something to remember the cuss by!" and kindred suggestions were advanced by the jovial miners.

Pale Jack fired a second shot, though by this time Murphy was fully five hundred feet away, and therefore well out of range.

The man from Pinos Altos had got to the end of the street by this time, and disappeared from view in the bushes by the roadside.

The "difficulty" was ended.

CHAPTER X.

A CUNNING TRICK.

And now to return to the road-agent who, in the custody of the soldiers, had started for Silver City.

The party rode along in pairs, the sergeant and the prisoner heading the troop.

The sergeant was a middle-aged man with a red face and a dissipated look.

For half an hour no word passed between the officer and the prisoner; then the troopers in the rear got into a heated discussion, and as they were so busily engaged in disputing with each other that the sergeant perceived they would not be likely to pay any attention to a conversation between himself and the prisoner, he took advantage of the fact to remark:

"You are in a mighty bad hole, stranger."

"You can bet high on that," the road-agent acknowledged.

"Say, I am in this world for what I can make out of it," the sergeant intimated in a cautious tone, and he cast a glance backward at the troopers, as if afraid of their overhearing his words.

The face of the prisoner lighted up suddenly, and he, too, took a look at the soldiers.

"It is all right if we are careful to speak cautiously," the sergeant said.

"You mean business?"

"Yes, if you have got the wherewithal to do business with."

"I have fifty dollars."

"Are you willing to give it up?"

"Yes, if there is any chance for me to get the worth of my money out of it."

"Well, that depends a good deal on yourself. As far as I am concerned, I am willing to do all I can for you."

"Let me see," and the road-agent meditated for a few moments.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, at last.

"Go ahead! Spit it out!"

"Do you know Paddy Kelly's place, the Hole in the Wall saloon—the first saloon on this road as you come into Silver City?"

"Oh, yes; I know the place well," the soldier responded. "Many is the drink I have had there."

"Suppose you take it into your head that you want a drink when we come to the place."

"I can do that."

"Invite us all in to have a drink with you."

"I will."

"Then, as soon as I get in the saloon I will have a violent attack of the colic, and cry out for Heaven's sake to give me a chance to lie down."

"Yes, yes; I see."

"Paddy Kelly's room is right back of the bar, where he sleeps. You have me carried in there, and I will pass you over the fifty."

"That is one of the most important things about the business," and the sergeant winked significantly.

"Then you go out to get me some whisky. Contrive to be detained for a few moments, and when you return you will find me among the missing."

"It is a good scheme!"

"Your captain will probably curse your

carelessness, but all men are apt to blunder once in a while."

"He can't very well curse the fifty dollars out of my pocket," the sergeant remarked, with a grin.

"No; that is a clear impossibility," the prisoner returned. "Besides, it is not likely that the captain will trouble his head much about the matter; one road-agent more or less doesn't make much difference, you know."

"That is all fight; I will do the job for you, and the captain can go and hang himself for all I care."

This ended the conversation, and the two rode on in silence until the neighborhood of Silver City was reached.

In front of Paddy Kelly's the sergeant drew rein.

"My throat is as dry as an ash heap, and I want a drink in the worst kind of way," he announced. "Will you all come in and have a bowl, boys?"

"You bet!" chorused the troopers.

"I wouldn't mind being counted in on that racket, too," the prisoner chimed in.

"That is all right, of course," the sergeant assented. "You are in a bad hole, anyway, and mebbe a good, big drink of bug juice will make you feel better."

"It will not make me feel any worse, that is sure," the captive declared.

Then the party dismounted, fastened their steeds to the hitching posts, and all entered the saloon.

As it happened, there were no customers in the place, only the proprietor, Paddy Kelly, a short, thick-set, middle-aged Irishman, with a forbidding face, who presided behind the bar.

He looked with surprise upon the prisoner as the party came into the saloon.

"Hello! Phat's the trouble?" he called out.

"Nothing much," the sergeant replied. "Only this individual got an idea that he owned the earth and wanted to collect toll from people on the roads, but he slipped up some way, and we happened to come along just in time to take charge of him."

"Oh, well; little mistakes of this kind will happen," the saloon-keeper observed.

"What'll yez have, byes?"

"Whisky!" cried all of the party, as with one voice.

Kelly proceeded to set out the glasses and a bottle.

"Blame me if I ain't got an awful queer sensation in my stomach," the prisoner declared, leaning heavily on the counter. "My head is awhirling all around, too, and you kin bet yer life that I feel mighty bad."

"H'ist a leetle whisky inter yer as soon as you can," the sergeant advised.

The prisoner reached a trembling hand for the bottle which Kelly, in a sympathizing manner, pushed toward him; but before he could touch the bottle, he uttered a loud groan, staggered back from the counter, and sank in writhing convulsions on the floor.

The soldiers were all excitement immediately.

"He's got a fit!" cried one.

"Throw a pail of water over him!" yelled another.

"Force some whisky down his throat," urged a third.

"Keep back, so as to give him air and he will come out all right," the sergeant declared.

"Got a bed anywhere handy, Kelly, that we can put him on for a few minutes, so as to give him a chance to get over it?" the officer asked.

"Yis; right in here," and the Irishman hastened to open a door at the end of the bar.

"Give me a hand, one of you!" ordered the sergeant.

Into the room, which was a small apartment about twelve feet square, with a single window, no door but the one which led into the saloon, and whose only furniture was a cot bed with a blanket for a cover, and a soap box in lieu of a chair, the prisoner was carried, and deposited on the bed.

He was still writhing in agony.

"Bring in some whisky, Kelly, and I

will see if I can't force some down his throat," the sergeant exclaimed.

Kelly hurried from the room.

"You needn't wait, boys; go get your whisky, and I will be out in a minute," the officer continued.

The men did not wait for a second bidding, but trooped out into the saloon.

"Go ahead and help yourselves, boys," the saloon-keeper said, pushing a bottle over the counter to the troopers.

They did not wait for a second command, but at once attacked the whisky, while Paddy Kelly, seizing a bottle and glass, re-entered the little room.

The sergeant met him at the door.

"He is coming around all right," the soldier said, taking the bottle and glass.

"I'll just give him a sup of this, and then let him be quiet for a few minutes."

"All right!" and Kelly retreated to the bar.

The sergeant, in a careless way, pushed the door so that it was almost shut.

There was not much need of taking any extra precautions, for the soldiers, busily engaged in filling out their whisky, were not disposed to pay any attention to anything else.

The prisoner rose quickly from the bed as soon as the closed door hid him from the view of the men in the saloon, and from a breast pocket drew a roll of bills.

"There is the fifty!" handing over the bills to the sergeant.

"Now, if you will get out of here for a moment I will make myself scarce."

While he had been apparently writhing in the agonies of a fit, he had contrived to loosen the bandage on his wrists so as to slip his hands out.

"All right! Going to vamose out of the window, I suppose?" the sergeant queried; stowing away the bills in his wallet with a deal of satisfaction. "Yes; that is my little game."

"If I give you a couple of minutes' start will that do?"

"Oh, yes; nicely!"

"Be careful not to make any noise in raising the window, for if you do and any of the boys should happen to hear it and call my attention to the fact, I should have to make an investigation, you know."

"Of course; but I will be careful."

"All right! See that you do."

Then the sergeant went into the saloon, carelessly pulling the door to, after him.

"Leave a little of the whisky for me, boys!" he suggested.

"Oh, there's an ocean of bug juice, yet!" one of the trooper's assured.

"How is the man? Is he coming around all right?" asked another.

"You bet!" the sergeant replied. "There isn't anything like a little good whisky to limber a man up when he gets a spell of this kind."

"As soon as I wet my whistle I will give him another dose, and then I reckon he will be all right."

And while speaking, the sergeant had been on the alert to catch the sound of the window being opened.

But he heard no noise.

"The galoot must be mighty darned keeferful," the sergeant muttered under his breath, as he smacked his lips after drinking the potent liquor.

"Lemme see!" he mused, "I reckon I have given the fellow time enough. I want to do the fair thing, but, if he hasn't got start enough, and I should happen to capture him, it wouldn't be square for him to blame me, for I have lived right up to the letter of my bargain with him."

Then the sergeant chuckled quietly to himself, for he thought there was a big chance that the start was not sufficient, and that the road-agent would be recaptured.

"I wonder if he has got another fifty in his clothes somewhere, so he kin try this rifle over ag'in?" the sergeant asked himself, with a grin, as he poured out some whisky in a glass.

This done, he pushed open the door of the small room, but, as soon as he did so, a cry of surprise came from the lips of all outside.

The room was empty.

The open window was ample explanation to the staring group.

"Blame it all!" cried the sergeant, apparently very much astonished. "The cuss has played 'possum on us and got off!"

Loud were the expressions of astonishment which came from the troopers.

"But he can't be far off!" the sergeant assumed. "He hasn't had time to git far away, and the odds are big that we kin nail Mister Man again."

"Yes, yes!" shouted the rest.

"Two of you jump through the window, and the rest come with me!" the sergeant commanded.

The order was immediately obeyed.

The sporting blood of the troopers was up and eagerly they entered upon the chase.

There's no sport in this world like a man-hunt, and the troopers could not have pursued the fugitive more earnestly if a reward of a thousand dollars was offered for his capture.

But not the slightest trace could they gain of their prey.

They questioned everybody in the neighborhood, but nobody had seen the man.

He had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him.

The sergeant was astounded, for he had felt sure the fugitive would be captured.

"Well, these little things will happen," the sergeant concluded, at last, when he gave up the search.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GAMBLER'S STORY.

After the abrupt departure of the boasting stranger, amid the yells of the jeering crowd, Pale Jack recharged the cylinder of his revolver, and, returning it to his pistol pocket, once more into the barber shop made his way.

"Now, then, if you will have the kindness to attend to me I will be much obliged to you," Jack said, resuming his seat in the chair.

"All ready, sir!" assented Mignon, beginning the necessary preparation.

"Allow me to compliment you upon the easy victory which you gained," the girl added, "but I must say that I was considerably surprised, for I thought the man would make a better fight."

"Well, it is sometimes a very difficult matter to tell how men will pan out," the gambler observed. "In my business, you see, I meet all sorts of men and am obliged to make a close study of human nature."

"The opinion I formed of this fellow was that he was one who would stand up to the rack and take his gruel pretty well under ordinary circumstances, but if he once was taken by surprise so as to get rattled, the chances were big that he would show the white feather."

"You calculated both closely and correctly, as events proved."

"Yes, it came out all right. You understand, miss, I suppose, that I was not anxious to damage the man in any way."

"I presume not," the girl replied, having now finished lathering Pale Jack's face, and commencing to strop her razor in true professional style.

And the reader must understand that the following conversation was carried on in the intervals, so to speak, of the shaving operation.

"The man made a nuisance of himself, and it was necessary for the good of the community that he should be sat on and squelched. As it happened, that duty devolved upon me and I did it to the best of my ability."

"No one could have done any better; and, by the way, allow me to thank you for getting the fellow out of my shop, for I probably would have had trouble with him."

"Yes, you might, for the man was just drunk enough to be ugly."

"If I can return the favor at any time pray command me."

"Thank you; but, do you really mean that?" Pale Jack asked, an earnest tone in his voice.

"Yes, every word of it."

"Well, come to think of it, I don't know but what you can help me a little, if you feel disposed that way."

"Go ahead and explain."

"There's a lady in the case," Pale Jack proceeded to explain, and there was a slight trace of embarrassment in his manner.

"A lady, eh?"

"Yes, and that is where you come in, you know."

"Of course."

"I didn't catch on to the thing until this morning, and I have been kinder bothered about the affair ever since."

"I see."

"I will tell you the whole thing right from A to Ampersand, so you will get a good grip on it."

"That will be best, of course."

About a month ago there came to this camp a man named Jonathan Vanderbilt, a white-headed, white-bearded old gentleman, nicely dressed, and who carried himself as though he was worth a mint of money.

"He did bring some cash with him, too, for he bought one of the best claims in the town. It is a small bit of property, but has always panned out well."

"The Red Gopher is the name of the claim, and it was owned by a fellow who was just dying to get to his folks in the East."

"Along came this Jonathan Vanderbilt, and one day when he was blowing in the hotel about how he was willing to pay a good price for a good claim, the Red Gopher man happened to hear him and jumped at the chance to catch a tenderfoot."

"That was natural."

"Yes, in a community of this kind the men can be roughly classified as sharks and suckers. He charged the old man a couple of thousand dollars more than he expected for the property—in fact, two thousand more than he had offered the claim for to a half-a-dozen, myself among the number. The result was, the old fellow made a few inquiries and then bought the claim."

"And the other man hustled to the East as fast as he could go, I presume?"

"Yes; he had made his pile and so had no more use for New Mexico."

"The Red Gopher claim was so small a property that the owner could only work a couple of men beside himself to advantage, but having picked up a good deal of knowledge about mining matters in knocking around the West, he knew how to handle his claim as well, if not better, than the average miner," Pale Jack explained.

"Yes, I see; but I should think that this Vanderbilt, being a tenderfoot, would labor under a terrible disadvantage in handling a property of this kind."

"Well, he retained the two men who were working in the mine, and then put on another one as a sort of a superintendent—a man who hasn't been in this district long, and I will say right out that I think he is a human snake if there ever was one."

"Well, Mr. Delmaine, I will say, without any desire to flatter, that upon your judgment I would place great weight."

"Much obliged to you for your good opinion. As a rule I generally hit mighty near the truth."

"This superintendent is named Fernando Caretta, and claims to be half American and half Spanish, the son of a wealthy Spaniard who was in business in San Francisco and married an American girl there."

"The fellow, evidently, has been well brought up and doesn't come of any common stock, and it is likewise evident that he knows a deal about mining—regular scientific mining, as well as the practical working part."

"In fact, I think he is far better posted than he is inclined to admit."

"Isn't that rather odd?" Mignon asked, with a peculiar look in her eyes.

"Yes, it is; and I don't exactly understand it, for, as a rule, out in this country, men are very much inclined to boast

and brag about whatever knowledge they may possess."

"Does the man ever explain how it is that he happens to possess this knowledge?"

"No; he is rather inclined to be evasive; says he has been knocking around the mining regions for some time, and that is how he got a chance to pick up his information."

"A man could pick up practical information in that way, but not much scientific knowledge."

"Yes, that is my opinion. I have an idea, you see, that this man has been through a regular course of scientific instruction, and that is one of the reasons why I don't take any stock in him."

"If he is a regularly trained mining expert, why don't he come out and say so?"

"Yes, why doesn't he?" the girl repeated; "there must be some powerful reason for it, or else he would."

"Undoubtedly!" Pale Jack acquiesced.

"Now then, I will come to the milk in the cocoanut. The Red Gopher claim, instead of petering out as the former owner and about everybody else in the town expected, has been getting richer and richer, and I have it from good authority that some high grade pay dirt has just been struck."

"So the tenderfoot got a bargain after all."

"Yes, and it is a mighty lucky thing for him that he did; for if the mine hadn't turned out well he would have been ruined in short order."

"I don't take any stock in the old man's yarns, you see, that he is a cousin of the great Vanderbilts in the East, and possesses wealth galore."

"No; if he was rich he would not be likely to be out in this neck of the woods fooling with a two-cent mine," was Mignon's opinion.

"You have got that down straight, I reckon. This little bit of good luck seems to have turned the old man's head, for he is beginning to put on as many airs as though he owned half the town."

"He has never neglected his liquor since he struck the town, but has not been in the habit of getting full up to the neck as he does now."

"Then he has taken to gambling, too, and a regular nightly visitor he is to my place; something of a nuisance, I can tell you, for when his cash runs out he wants to play on credit, and that I will not have from anybody, for it is only money that talks at my table."

"Yes, I understand."

"And I think it is this durned superintendent, this Fernando Caretta, who is leading the old man to make a fool of himself."

"If he is doing it there is some motive, of course," the girl assumed.

"Certainly! I told you I was coming to the milk in the cocoanut, and here it is:

"Margaret Vanderbilt, the old man's daughter, is a mighty pretty girl, and a regular lady, too; there isn't any doubt about that! I have not been knocking around in the wilds of New Mexico all my life, and a man would be safe in betting a fortune that I know a real lady when I see one."

"Now, then, it is my notion that this superintendent has got his eyes on the girl. He is going to lead the old man to make a fool of himself, get control of the mine, and then work the trick so the girl will come to the conclusion that the best thing she can do will be to marry him."

"Ah, yes, I see; a cleverly devised scheme, and from your description of the man I should say that he was just the kind of a fellow to devise such a plan and put it into successful operation, too—that is, if he was not interfered with," Mignon added, with a half-smile.

"Well, he is going to be interfered with if I can do the trick," the gambler replied, with the quiet deliberation which was so prominent a trait of his character.

"Of course, I suppose that people who know anything about the thing might

say it wasn't any of my soup, so I had better keep my spoon out, but I am not a-going to do it, by Heaven!" the gambler exclaimed, with the first trace of passion that he had betrayed during the conversation.

"Don't make any mistake about the matter and come to the conclusion that I have fallen in love with the girl, for I have not," the sport added.

"She is a lady and I am a gambler—a hard nut, men call me; and even if I was weak enough to take a fancy to the girl, I know very well that I would have a mighty hard job to make a woman from the East look with favorable eyes upon a man who gets his living by gambling."

"Out in the breezy West the prejudice against men in my line of business is not as strong as it is in the East."

"I am aware of that fact," Mignon confessed.

"Besides, not being much of a lady's man, anyway, I don't know how it is that I came to take an interest in this girl," the sport explained. "It is one of those strange things which will happen sometimes in this world."

"It does you credit, though!" Mignon declared.

"Maybe; I hope so, anyway."

"Well, this is what I was thinking: the girl is in danger; if I attempt to warn her it is possible she will not take it kindly, the chances are a hundred to one, you see, that she knows all about me and may not be willing to believe that a professional sport can be man enough to want to do a helpless woman a good turn."

"The thought is well taken; people do let their prejudices run away with them in just such foolish style."

"Now, you are a woman, one of her own sex, and I think the chance is good that she may pay heed to what you say."

"Yes, if she is at all sensible I think there is a fair prospect she will listen to me."

"Well, I don't know much about her, for I have only met her twice—once when I had been for a stroll up the trail I met her and her father coming from the town. The old man introduced me; if he hadn't been drinking heavily perhaps he would have had more sense."

"Then, a couple of days ago, when I was in the hills with my gun, for a little shooting, I met her again. She had been for a walk and we came down the trail for a half-a-mile or so together."

"That afforded you a fine opportunity for a little conversation," Mignon intimated.

"She is a lady, every inch of her, and when we parted I made up my mind that I would do my level best for her if she ever needed aid."

"I will undertake your mission and do what I can for you."

This ended the conversation.

CHAPTER XII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

Pale Jack, his shaving being finished, departed.

Mignon watched him as he proceeded down the street.

"He is a gambler and all that, but he is also a white man clear to the backbone," the girl exclaimed.

"A man with a conscience, too, for, although he has evidently been hard hit by this Margaret Vanderbilt, yet because he is a gambler, and thinks that she, because she comes from the East, will not have a good opinion of him, he resolutely has made up his mind not to try to win her."

Then the girl shook her head, clearly implying that she did not approve of Pale Jack's course.

"It is all right, of course, from an honorable standpoint, but it is all wrong when you come to look at it in the light of common-sense."

"Once a gambler is not always a gambler."

"While the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return."

"That is a little verse which I will have to repeat to Master Jack the next time I

hold a conversation with him on this subject."

"If he likes the girl, and there is any chance for him to win her, there isn't any reason why he should not go in and try for the prize, without any regard to what he is."

"If she does not like him to follow that kind of life, it will be an easy matter for him to change it."

"It really does not amount to anything at all, but some men will make such big mountains out of mole-hills."

Then another thought came into Mignon's mind, and she laughed quietly to herself for a few moments.

"He seemed rather surprised at my agreeing to aid him so readily."

"Of course it was possible for him to guess that, while I was playing his game, I was carrying on one of my own."

"While the description of this mining superintendent, Fernando Caretta, does not agree with that of the man of whom I am in search, yet there is a sort of a family resemblance, so to speak, which inspires the hope that he may be the game I am after."

"My man is educated, has been to college. I don't know what he studied for there, but it is just as likely as not that he took up the engineer branch, and perhaps interested himself in mining matters."

"It stands to reason that he will not be walking around in his own proper person, and I must look to see him disguised in some way, for the man undoubtedly knows there is a big reward offered for him, and that no pains will be spared to hunt him down."

At this point Mignon's reflections were interrupted by the appearance of Captain McIntyre, on horseback, coming at a brisk gallop up the street.

He drew rein before Mignon's shop, and the girl went to the door to greet him.

"I just stopped in passing to give you a bit of news," the captain said. "That scoundrel of a road-agent whom you captured succeeded in escaping from my men before they could get him to the lock-up."

"I am sorry to hear that, for the fellow ought to have been punished."

"Yes, that is true. It was a piece of carelessness on the part of my men; but I have started a hue and cry after the outlaw, and I don't doubt will catch him again."

"I hope so," Mignon replied, but she had very great doubts in regard to this.

Then the captain complimented her upon the pluck which she had displayed in setting up for herself, said that hereafter he should certainly patronize her shop—for which the girl thanked him in a becoming manner, and then took his departure.

It was now high noon, so Mignon shut up her shop and started for the hotel to get her dinner.

She was annoyed by the escape of the road-agent.

"There was something mysterious about that affair," she mused, as she proceeded on her way.

"I do not understand why the fellow should single me out for an attack, as undoubtedly he did."

"If he had been brought to trial I might have got at the truth of the matter. Anyhow, it strikes me as being an extremely mysterious affair."

As dinner was not ready when Mignon arrived at the hotel, she went up-stairs to her room, where a genuine surprise awaited her.

Robbers had been in the apartment.

Her trunk, a small, but substantial one, fastened by an excellent lock, was out on the floor, wide open. The hasp of the lock had been ripped off by main force, and all the contents were exposed.

"What does this mean?" the astonished woman exclaimed. "What on earth did they want to get into my trunk for? What did they expect to find there?" And she proceeded to an examination of the contents.

She removed all the things in the little "traveling companion" until she came to the bottom layer, but, as far as she could discover, not a single article was missing.

Then she made a discovery.

The paper which covered the trunk bottom had been slit into ribbons with a knife!

"Oh! now I see the game!" Mignon cried. "The rascals had an idea that there was a false bottom, but why should they think that?"

She gazed in a thoughtful way at the ravages which the knife had made.

"No one ever went to all this trouble without a good and sufficient reason!" she declared, thoughtfully. "Was it for money? Absurd idea! A woman reduced to the necessity of setting up as a female barber in order to support herself, would not be likely to have either money or valuables concealed in her one little piece of baggage."

"No; my errand to this district is suspected."

"The scoundrels fancied that in my trunk they would find papers, or memoranda, or something which would give them a clew."

"But, they did not!" And the girl laughed merrily. "I am not fool enough to carry important papers in such a loose safe as a trunk—not I!"

"But if my mission to this locality is suspected, how in the name of all that is wonderful did the truth leak out?"

The girl pondered over the matter for a few moments.

"In New York, of course!" she decided. "The suspects in New York have me shadowed!" And that peculiar air of resolution which characterized the dauntless barber-detective at once showed in her firm face.

She was on guard again.

"But who betrayed my mission here? Has some one been talking? Ah, me! When will men learn that the most carefully planned enterprise can be utterly ruined by a little foolish chatter."

"This party that I am here to serve has good friends in New York—people who are willing to go to a great deal of trouble to be of service; but it is now evident that the other people have been on the watch—have been shrewd enough to get onto the game, and the result is that my game was warned, so was all ready for me."

"Well," and she smiled resignedly, "it is an ill wind which blows nobody good. This little affair satisfies me that I am on the right scent. My wanted man is in this district—probably right in this very camp—and if I do not succeed in nailing him, then it will be because I am not half as cute as I think I am!"

"So far I certainly have held my own, and do not think the opposing party can boast of any advantage, although it is now apparent that they have suspected my game."

"But little good has that done them thus far, for not a bit of proof have they obtained, so I shall go right ahead with my work."

"Let me see, now. The proper caper will be to kick up a row about my trunk being broken open, and to express my wonderment as to what the rascals were after. I must, of course, play the innocent and thus awaken a public sympathy that will help me greatly when the pinch comes."

Acting upon this idea, Mignon at once summoned the landlady and showed her the trunk.

Mrs. Hauser immediately called old Fritz.

Great was the wonder expressed by the excellent couple.

No such thing had ever happened in the house before, and they could not understand it.

"Dose mans who this job did vas a pack of fools!" the old German declared. "Mine gootness! did they t'ink dot a young womans like you would carry around mit her gold dust mit her trunk?"

"Well, they were mightily fooled anyhow, for they only had their labor for their pains!" Mignon remarked.

Then they all went down to dinner.

The boarders all were much surprised when they learned what had occurred. It seemed to them absurd that anybody

should break open a poor woman's one little trunk, expecting it to contain valuables.

Mignon professed to be greatly astonished, of course, but did not say much about the matter, allowing others to do the talking.

After dinner Mignon returned to her shop, when a couple of men at once came in—one who wanted to be shaved, and the other to converse with her about the robbery, as the girl soon discovered.

This latter was Sandy Bickerstaff, the man who, the reader will recall, went to such pains to make the acquaintance of the girl when she arrived in Silver City.

He now pretended that he dropped in just to see how the girl was getting along in her new venture.

"I see you have got things fixed up so mighty nice hyer that it is a kind of a temptation for a fellow to come in and get shaved, even if he is in the habit of wearing a beard, as I do," Bickerstaff remarked, caressing the scanty growth of sandy hair which ornamented his jaw.

"Yes, I tried to have everything fixed up as well as I could," Mignon replied.

"It isn't like an Eastern barber shop, that is certain, but it is not so bad for a new country like this."

"Oh, no! It is a good outfit, and no mistake," and then Bickerstaff spoke in regard to the breaking open of the trunk.

"It seems about as stupid a thing as I ever heard on," he said, in conclusion. "And that is just what I said to the old Dutchman when he told me about the matter."

"What valuables did the galoots think they were going to find?"

"Oh, I don't understand," Mignon replied with an innocent air. "I suppose they must have made some mistake about the matter. I don't believe the robber could have known to whom the little trunk belonged."

During this conversation the girl had been busily engaged in shaving the miner, and had now about finished the operation.

"By the way, I am going out for a walk this afternoon, so as to see what the town looks like, and I am told that some of the prettiest scenery is to be found in the neighborhood of the Red Gopher mine. Which way do I go to get there, please?"

The girl put the question to the miner, who had just risen from the chair, but she had her eyes earnestly fixed on the face of Bickerstaff, and so noted the uneasy expression that appeared on his face as she spoke.

"Go right straight up the trail, ma'am, until you come to where the road forks; then you take the lefthand path, and it is only 'bout a quarter of a mile farther on."

"Thank you," responded Mignon.

"Don't mention it, ma'am," returned the man, with a gallant bow, and, paying for his shave, he departed.

"Mighty nice folks up thar at the Red Gopher mine," Bickerstaff remarked, insinuatingly. "S'pose you have met the old man and his daughter?"

"Oh, no! Is there a young lady there?" asked Mignon, innocently. "Oh, that will be delightful!—that is, if she is not too proud to associate with a girl like myself, who is obliged to earn her bread in this queer way."

"Well, I reckon she is a kind of airish young woman, but I don't know much about her. Her father thinks that he is a mighty big man, so it is possible the daughter may be a leetle stuck up—in fact, it will be a wonder if she ain't, for the old codger prides himself upon being one of the big Vanderbilts, and kinder acts as if he didn't think that the rest of the world was quite as good as he is."

"Oh, well, if she is that kind of a young woman the chances are that she will not want to have anything to do with me."

"I ain't no ways sure 'bout the thing, of course," Bickerstaff explained, as he rose to depart. "I am only giving you my ideas 'bout how the land lays."

"I am much obliged, I am sure," Mignon replied, and Sandy made his exit from the shop.

A contemptuous smile illuminated the face of the female barber.

"He thinks he is smart, no doubt, but he will have to rise early in the morning to pull the wool over my eyes!" the girl exclaimed.

"This same Sandy Bickerstaff is a tool of the man I seek, and through him I can, no doubt, get at the principal, if I am not able to find him in any other way."

"The fellow is alarmed by my trip to the neighborhood of the Red Gopher; ergo, the quicker I investigate the matter the better, so I will go at once!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLOND BEAUTY.

With Mignon Lawrence to decide was to act, so, having made up her mind what to do, she proceeded to do it promptly.

At once donning her hat and coat she locked the shop door and started up the trail.

In five minutes she had passed out of the camp, for Bearopolis was all huddled together in one little valley.

The road wound through a rough and broken country, with only a house here and there.

Soon the girl came to where the side trail split off from the main road, and into it she turned.

Just above the junction was a small mine, where a good-sized mountain brook came tumbling down from the foothills on its way to Bear Creek.

Not another house was there on the lonely trail, winding its way amid the rocks, the pines, dwarf oaks and junipers, until the Red Gopher mine was reached.

The Red Gopher property was on Bear Creek. Where the claim had been taken up had once been the bed of the river, but some mighty convulsion of nature, in the far-off ages, had changed the course of the stream, and now, instead of washing the foot of the bluff, which rose fifty feet in the air as abruptly as though it was a creation of man's cunning hand, the creek wandered through the valley, five hundred feet or so away.

The Red Gopher claim had the air of being a substantial plant. There was a good-sized log house, built in two sections, with a passage-way in the middle, and chimneys, plastered with clay, at both ends, after the Southern fashion.

This residence was a story and a half high, so that its inmates could indulge in the luxury of up-stairs bedrooms—the stairs, in this case, as in all similar ones, represented by ladders.

There were two smaller log houses, one for the accommodation of the miners, the other used for an office and storage.

When Mignon came round the bend in the trail, which was somewhat abrupt, and caught sight of the Red Gopher valley, as the little vale was usually termed, she halted and an exclamation of admiration escaped her.

"I don't wonder that people think this view is well worth seeing!" she declared.

She was standing by the side of a giant boulder, an egg-shaped mass which cropped out of the earth and lifted its crest skyward twenty feet from the surface of the ground.

"Now, then, if Miss Margaret Vanderbilt is half as good-looking as the vale which holds her abode, she may consider herself a remarkably fortunate young lady."

As Mignon spoke she advanced completely around the boulder.

Judge of her surprise, then, to discover that she was face to face with a tall, handsome girl, with the most beautiful blond hair and the bluest of blue eyes.

This lady was neatly robed in a dark blue flannel walking dress.

Seated upon a mossy bank she held an open book in her hand and had evidently been engaged in reading when interrupted by Mignon's approach.

That it was Margaret Vanderbilt the new comer was sure.

That she had overheard what Mignon had so bluntly said the female barber was certain; but the actress was never at a loss to act.

A comical expression came over her face; then she laughed.

"Well, well; if I had had any idea that you were in the neighborhood I should not have spoken quite so frankly!" she exclaimed.

"The mischief is done, though, and, as it cannot be undone, I must make the best of it.

"You are Miss Margaret Vanderbilt, I suppose?"

"Yes, and you are Miss Mignon Lawrence?"

"Oho! Since you recognize me it is apparent that you have been furnished with my description?"

"Yes, I have!"

"Well, I am rather surprised, and yet I ought not to be," Mignon remarked, "for I don't suppose there is a soul within ten miles of the mining camp who has not by this time been treated to a full description of the female barber and her place of business."

"It was a very novel idea and few girls would have had the courage to attempt such a thing," Miss Vanderbilt averred, and it was plain from this speech that she was more disposed to admire than to blame.

"Well, there was a good deal of Hobson's choice about the matter," Mignon explained. "I could do that, and there wasn't anything else better, as far as I could see.

"I knew that the men in the camp would think it was all right, but was afraid the women would not think that I was very nice."

"Under the circumstances no one ought to blame you," Margaret assumed. "It is an honest occupation and you certainly showed a great deal of courage. I only wish I had one-half as much."

The girl spoke with a regretful air.

"Oh, I reckon that in an emergency you would have courage enough!" Mignon declared.

"No one, you understand, knows what they can really do until they are put to the test. It is circumstances which make heroes."

"But, I tell you what," Mignon added, abruptly, "if you should happen to be placed in a situation where courage is needed, and you don't feel quite strong enough to meet the test yourself, just come to me and see if I can't brace you up a little!"

Mignon said this with a laugh, but there was a ring of earnestness in her voice and manner which made a deep impression upon the other girl, upon whose face came a wistful expression; then she cast a hurried glance around, as though apprehensive that some one might be playing the spy upon the interview.

But not a soul was within sight.

"Do not fear to speak if there is anything you wish to say to me," Mignon urged, encouragingly. "I give you my word that you can trust me, and if there is anything I can do for you I shall be glad to be of assistance."

"Yes, yes; I feel sure that I can trust you, for there is something about you which inspires me with perfect confidence, although you are an utter stranger," Margaret confessed, hurriedly, and in a tone full of deep agitation.

"I never betrayed a confidence yet, and you can rest assured that I will do all in my power to aid you. I don't know as that is saying much, for, as I am now situated, advice is about all that I can give anybody."

"Advice is just what I want!"

"Good! You have come to the right shop, then, for I can give you plenty, but whether it will be for good or otherwise, events alone can determine."

"Oh, I feel sure from what I already know of you that you are both shrewd and bold!"

"Thank you for the compliment!" with a curtsy. "I assure you I will do my best to deserve it.

"But, my dear Miss Vanderbilt, as this is rather a public place for a conference, hadn't we better find a spot in among the pines where we will be sheltered from the view of any one passing

along the trail, or from the observation of any idler in the vale below?"

"Yes, you are right; it would be best," Margaret replied.

The two girls then sought shelter amid a group of evergreens some fifty feet from the trail.

"Now, then, we can speak with perfect freedom," Mignon assured, taking a seat upon an old tree trunk.

"Yes, and it is best, too, that no one should know we have held a secret conference," Margaret added, seating herself upon a moss-grown rock, as she spoke.

"I presume you have heard the story of how my father came to settle in this camp?" the girl continued.

"In little towns of this kind everybody knows everybody else's business, and so you may rest assured that I have heard all the particulars."

"I am almost alone in the world, for, with the exception of my father, I have not a single living relative."

"My own case, exactly, minus the father."

"This is one of the cases where perfect frankness must be used," said Margaret, with some slight hesitation.

"The revelation which I have to make is a painful one, but it must be made, for if I do not fully explain the situation to you it will not be possible for you to advise me."

"As the French say, my dear Miss Vanderbilt, that goes without saying."

"Do not be so formal; since we are to be friends, let it be Mignon and Margaret between us!" the girl cried, impulsively.

"With all my heart."

And then the two clasped hands and kissed each other.

"Now, then, we are firm and fast allies, so go ahead with your tale."

"My father is weak and irresolute—not really bad, you know, that is, I do not believe he would commit a crime, but he is easily influenced, and a bold, wily and unscrupulous man can easily gain an enormous hold on him."

"I comprehend; I have seen just such men."

"In the East he had a good business. We were wealthy. The business came to him from his father, and all he had to do was to take care of it, but even that was distasteful to him, so he sold out.

"Luckily, he had a good lawyer who attended to the matter, and, anticipating that my father would not make a wise use of his money, persuaded him to buy an annuity, so he could be sure of receiving a certain amount every year. If it had not been for that precaution we would have had a hard time of it, for father was not content to play the gentleman and live upon the interest of his money; he would insist upon trying all sorts of speculations."

"And usually lost, I presume?"

"Yes; and finally, growing disgusted at his bad luck, as he termed it, he came out West, thinking he would be able to do better, and in this mine he invested all the money he had left," Margaret explained.

"I feared it would turn out like nearly all his ventures, and I feel sure that about everybody in the town thought he had been made a victim; but, for once, fortune stood his friend, as the mine turned out to be much better than anybody expected."

"Mines are the most uncertain things in the world," Mignon observed. "Even the most experienced miners—men who have made a study of the thing for years—are deceived sometimes in regard to the value of mining properties."

"The mine has turned out to be very rich, but from the way things are going on I fear the purchase of this mine is going to be one of the worst things that ever happened to him," Margaret asserted, with a grave shake of the head.

"As my father knows nothing whatever about mining, it was necessary for him to get an experienced man to act as superintendent."

"Yes, I understand the situation. This Fernando Caretta has full control of the works, and the people in the camp

say that he understands his business perfectly—is, in fact, an expert."

"I have no doubt that it is the truth, for the mine is certainly doing well, but I fear that the superintendent is working more for himself than for his employer."

"Ah! Do you distrust him?" Mignon queried.

"Yes, I do; there is something about the man I do not like, although he has tried his best to be agreeable to me, but I feel sure he is a deep and dangerous schemer."

"My father has never been much of a drinking man and I never knew him to gamble, but, since he has come under the influence of this Caretta, he has got into the habit of using liquor to excess, and there is hardly a night now when he goes to bed sober."

"That is bad, and I most sincerely sympathize with you," Mignon assured.

"And he gambles, too, now. In fact, he has become infatuated with card playing—imagines that he is a great player, and almost every night he and the superintendent play poker together."

"If the superintendent is a good player and your father isn't, it will be a costly amusement for him, I surmise."

"It was Caretta who led my poor, weak, unfortunate father to both drink and gamble," Margaret asseverated, earnestly. "I am satisfied that this is the truth from what I have heard my father say in his unguarded moments; and, although I am not shrewd or skillful at reading the minds of men, yet I am impressed with the idea that Caretta has made up his mind to get my father in his power so he will be able to force me to marry him and to gain possession of the mine at the same time."

"A nice little game, truly!" Mignon assumed, with a toss of her head.

"I know the man wants to marry me, for he has done his best to win my favor from the beginning," Margaret explained; "but I took a violent dislike to the man from the beginning, but of course was careful not to allow him to discover my aversion to him, and always treated him with politeness; still, in a quiet way I discouraged his attentions all I could."

"Yes, I understand."

"But he doesn't seem to mind my coldness, and is becoming more and more ardent every day."

"And that sort of thing must be extremely disagreeable, I should fancy."

"It is, indeed; and now he has schemed so well that my father has begun to favor his suit. I am not yet of age, you see, and last night when he was so much in liquor as to be careless in regard to his words, he said bluntly it was about time I was married; and when I replied that I did not care for any one, he answered that it did not make any difference. His consent was all that was required, as I wasn't of age, and when he made up his mind to have me married the ceremony would take place."

"That kind of authority doesn't go in this section!" Mignon declared; "if you don't want to marry the man you need not, a dozen fathers to the contrary. The law out here is very elastic when it comes to a question of this sort."

"If you don't want to marry the man, say so and stick to it; and if your father makes this home too disagreeable for you to stand it, come to me in the camp and I will be a big sister to you!" and Mignon's manner plainly showed that she meant every word she said.

"Thanks! You have taken a load from my heart!" Margaret confessed.

"Don't you worry now about the matter. You have more friends in the town than you count upon, although you haven't tried to make acquaintances, and in the event of trouble you will find plenty to come to your aid."

Again Margaret uttered her grateful thanks.

"Oh, that is all right!" Mignon assured, in her careless way; "I must be going now," and she rose as she spoke.

"You must come and see me," she added. "If this scheming gentleman

finds that you have stanch friends in the camp it will make him cautious in his moves. But, now, good-by! Come soon!"

The girls returned to the trail and there they parted.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE AMBUSH.

Mignon retraced her steps toward the mining camp.

"I fancy a lively little row is in sight," she murmured, as she advanced with springy steps along the narrow, winding trail.

"This Caretta is playing the old game—getting the father in his power by tangling up the business so as to win the daughter and the money. The girl is alone and friendless, apparently, so it may appear to the schemer that he has a good chance of succeeding; but this is a very uncertain world—very uncertain. The most skillful player cannot keno every time.

"I have quite a curiosity, by the way, to see this Fernando Caretta, for, according to Miss Margaret, he is the ideal bold, bad man."

But Mignon's cogitations were interrupted, for a masked man stepped out into the trail about fifty feet ahead, greatly to her surprise.

He was dressed in the fashion common in the mountain region—big boots, rough pantaloons tucked into the boots, a dirty flannel shirt and a broad-brimmed slouch hat, much the worse for wear.

In his hand he held a revolver.

The hammer was up, and he leveled it full at the girl.

"Throw up your hands!" he commanded.

"Well, well, if this isn't a surprise party!" Mignon exclaimed; "but, up hands it is," suiting the action to the words.

"But, really, you are wasting your time, for I haven't got any money with me—that is, nothing to amount to anything, perhaps a dollar in my wallet, but not over."

"You talk too blame much!" growled the outlaw, angrily.

"That is the privilege of my sex," Mignon retorted; "and did you ever see a woman who did not talk too much?"

"Hush yer gab and come along with me!" cried a hoarse voice in her ear.

"Hello! is there another one of them?" the female barber cried, in surprise. "And that seems to be a familiar voice, too."

She turned, to behold another masked road-agent standing in the center of the trail.

Mignon recognized him immediately. It was the man who had stopped the coach and whom she had captured.

"Aha! is it there you are?" was the irrepressible girl's exclamation. "You succeeded in slipping through the fingers of the soldiers, all right, eh?"

"I reckon so, seeing as how I am here," the outlaw replied, with a chuckle.

"The soldiers didn't have such good luck with you as I did!" Mignon suggested.

"No, that is a sure enough fact, but I think I stand a good chance of squaring that account now!" and the road-agent laughed grimly.

"Well, you have got a leetle the best of it," the girl admitted, "but you will not make much out of me, for I am about as poor as the bird known to fame as Job's turkey."

"You ain't no National bank!" and the outlaw uttered another laugh, as if he thought he was extremely humorous.

"Not much! And anybody who picks me up for a gold mine will be wofully disappointed."

"Wal, I reckon I will make a good stake out of you before I get through with the job."

"Maybe you will, but if I had a small fortune I should like to bet that you will not," Mignon replied, aggressively.

"We will soon see about that," the outlaw retorted. "I reckon you are mighty smart, but you are not the only one in the world who has got any sense."

"Of course not! Why don't you tell me something I do not know?" Mignon asked.

"You have a mighty good opinion of

yourself; you people from the East think that we Westerners don't amount to shucks, but sometimes we are able to make you change your notion about that ar' thing."

"I am not setting myself up to be anything extra," Mignon averred; "but, although I am a woman, I am not one of the fainting kind, and am, as a rule, usually able to take care of myself."

"Oh, yes, you are a regular tearer, and no mistake," the road-agent declared, "but this time I have got you foul, so I will have to tie a leetle cord around them wrists of yours, for then you won't be tempted to show fight if you should take a notion of that kind in your head," the outlaw explained.

"That is a wise precaution, for I am a rather impulsive creature, and there is no telling what I might do upon the spur of the moment," Mignon admitted.

"I will fix it so that you will not make any bad breaks of that kind," the road-agent announced.

"No. 1, take a turn of a lariat around the wrists of this hyer woman," he commanded.

Mignon turned her head and saw that the other outlaw had approached and was now within a yard of her, a lariat in his hand.

Involuntarily the hands of the courageous girl clinched, and she felt a strong inclination to give the rascal a right-hander which would knock him heels over head; but she wisely restrained herself, for the road-agent chief had her covered with his revolver, and she could hardly hope to escape his bullet if she attempted to resist.

It was her policy to pretend to submit with a good grace, so she held out her hands, saying:

"I don't understand what you are going to do, but as I cannot help myself, I am obliged to submit."

"Right you are! You never said a truer word in your life!" was the outlaw's assurance.

CHAPTER XV.

A SURPRISING PROCEEDING.

The wrists of the girl were securely tied by the lesser road-agent, the outlaw chief carefully watching the proceeding.

"Make a good job of it, No. 1," the head rascal ordered, "for I have an idee that she is a mighty slippery customer."

"There isn't any doubt about that, so keep a sharp lookout for me," the girl warned, with a laugh.

"You are a plucky customer, there's no two ways about that," the leader confessed.

"Now, then, I am going to take you to make a little call," he added. "You want to come along quietly, you understand, and don't attempt to cut up any monkey-shines which will not do you any good."

"Oh, that is all right," Mignon assented, as cheerfully as though she had been invited to a wedding party. "You can depend upon my coming as quietly as a lamb."

"Which is correct, for you can't make anything by kicking now."

"Nary kick," responded Mignon, who did not disdain to use slang once in a while.

The road-agent chief went up the trail, after him came the girl, while the other outlaw followed, holding the lariat.

Soon the leader left the track and took his way amid the scrub oaks and pines which fringed the trail, going to the eastward.

Mignon had keen eyes, and soon discovered that the outlaw was following a faint trail.

For a good ten minutes, through the rough and broken country, the three held their way; then they came abruptly upon a small open plateau in the center of which was a log hut that had evidently been constructed by a Mexican or half-breed hunter and trapper.

As the three came into the opening the door of this hut opened, and a gaunt, ugly, middle-aged woman made her appearance.

She was dressed in the Mexican fashion, and from her face it was plain that she was of mixed blood, half Mexican, half Indian.

"We have brought a visitor to see you," the outlaw chief exclaimed. "Maybe she will stay a while with you, and if she does, I shall expect you to take good care of her."

"Oh, yes, I will look out for her all right," the woman responded, with a cruel smile, displaying her white, fang-like teeth.

Mignon surveyed her with curiosity, for never had she seen a more repulsive-looking woman, and when the outlaw spoke in regard to the probability of her remaining with the creature, she thought it was about time she said something.

"I say, stranger, I don't understand this at all! What on earth do you mean—what are you trying to get at, anyway?"

"I don't want to stay here, and what are you going to make by trying any such game as that with me?"

"The prospect doesn't suit you?" the outlaw chief asked, with a chuckle.

"No, indeed it does not!"

"Wal, I didn't think it would, but you will have to put up with it—grin and bear it, you know, unless you do what I want you to do."

"What is that?" asked Mignon. "You haven't asked me to do anything yet, have you?"

"No; but I am going to, and right off the reel, too, you bet yer life!" the outlaw chief promptly asserted.

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"What is your name and what is your business in these parts?"

"Easily answered," Mignon replied, confidently. "My name is Mignon Lawrence, and I came to Bearopolis in response to an invitation from my uncle, James Lawrence, who wrote me that he was going to settle down in Bearopolis and wanted me to keep house for him. My uncle is an old bachelor, and he and I are all that is left of the Lawrence family."

"That is a good enough story to tell," the outlaw leader responded, evidently incredulous.

"It is the truth; that is why I am here," Mignon reassured, as though surprised that her story should be doubted.

"How is it that your uncle didn't show up?" the road-agent leader cross-questioned.

"I don't know. I do not understand it at all," and a grave look came over her face. "I suppose something must have happened to him, or else he would either have come or written to me to tell why he was detained."

"And whatever put it into your head to start in as a female barber?"

"Well, I had to do something to support myself, for I only had a little money, and I thought I could do better at that than anything else I could go into," Mignon explained.

"Which is all bosh, to my thinking!" the outlaw chief ejaculated, roughly. "I don't take any stock in your yarn. I think the female barber business is all a blind!"

"A blind!" the girl echoed, apparently much surprised.

"That is what I said, and what I meant, too, you bet your life! You can't pick me up for no sucker, you know, for if any one does they will mighty soon drop me for a shark!"

"You have come to this ar' mining camp to play some game, and you set up as a barber so as to cover your tracks, for you didn't want anybody to get onto your leetle scheme."

"Oh, well, I don't suppose it will be of any use for me to say that you are away off," Mignon protested, with a gesture of impatience. "You seem to have made up your mind that you know all about it, so it will be a waste of time to attempt to persuade you that you are wrong."

"That is right," the road-agent acquiesced. "You hit it right center that time!" Then he proceeded to explain.

"This game of yours don't concern me at all, but as I have an idee that some friends of mine may be interested, I put up this job on you so as to find out all about the matter."

The girl shook her head protestingly. "I don't know what you mean at all," she declared.

"Oh, bosh!" was the road-agent's retort. "What is the use of trying to get out of

it when you see that I am onto the leetle game?"

"Maybe there is a game, but, if so, shouldn't I know about it?" Mignon demanded.

"You mustn't make any mistake, now, you know," the road-agent leader warned. "I ain't the kind of man to take all this trouble for nothing. I am after information, and you can bet your bottom dollar I am going to get it, too. If I can't get it in one way I will in another, for the information I am going to have, dead sure!"

"I hav'n't got any to give y--," Mignon assured, apparently greatly puzzled.

"Do you understand that you are completely in my power?"

"Oh, yes."

"And that if I choose to kill you I could do so, and nobody be able to bring the crime home to me?"

"I suppose that is true, but I don't see what possible good it will do you to kill me," the girl urged.

"Oh! satisfaction, that is all! And to a man like myself one life more or less don't matter," was the outlaw's brutish rejoinder.

"My, my! What a bloodthirsty chap you must be!" Mignon cried, apparently not much alarmed by the threat.

The road-agent was decidedly annoyed, for he had calculated upon producing a decided impression by his threatening statement.

"Mebbe you think I don't mean what I say?" he questioned, an ugly look on his ugly face.

"Oh, I reckon you are in earnest," the girl acknowledged. "You have gone to considerable trouble, which you wouldn't be apt to do if you didn't mean business."

"You can bet your life that I mean business. I am going to get the truth out of you if I have to kill you to do it!"

"Come, now, confess, or it will go hard with you!"

"I hav'n't anything to confess," Mignon promptly averred. "I have told you the only story I have got to tell, and if you know of a way to make me tell you a different one, go ahead and try it on as soon as you can!"

This defiance greatly enraged the outlaw, but he curbed his passion for the moment.

"I thought that when I went through your trunk I would diskiver some documents which would put me onto your game; I didn't, though, but I reckon now you must have the papers hid away in your clothes, and I'll have this woman search you, so if you want to save trouble you had better spit out the truth right away!" the outlaw informed his prisoner.

CHAPTER XVI.

MIGNON SHOWS FIGHT.

"You are just wasting your breath!" Mignon retorted, impatiently. "I haven't anything to confess and you will get no different story out of me than the one I have already told you; and as to your finding papers concealed about my clothes the idea is utterly ridiculous, and I don't see what you are driving at!"

"Mebbe you have got them hidden away in that ar' blamed old barber shop of your'n," the questioner suggested.

A contemptuous smile was the only answer to this.

"March into the hut with you!" the irate outlaw and foiled investigator commanded; "and, mind you, Mother Castro, keep your eyes wide open, for this is a sly jade, who will trick you if she can."

"Pooh! She will not be able to make a fool of me!" and the Mexican woman grinned her defiance in a glowering look into Mignon's face.

The outlaw chief, taking the lariat from the hands of his follower, gave it to the Mexican vixen.

"Come on!" ordered the woman, giving the lariat a vicious tug.

"After you are maners here, I suppose, but you need not try to pull my arms out of their sockets, either!" Mignon demurred, in a resentful way.

"Come on, you miserable North American!" and the woman gave another jerk

of the cord. "Bah! how I hate you miserable Gringos!"

"I reckon there isn't any love lost!" the girl retorted, "for I both hate and despise you greasy Greasers!"

"Better keep a civil tongue in your head or I will twist your neck for you!" the Mexican woman threatened, and she shook her tawny fist at the bold-spoken prisoner.

"Oh, go on with you, you old hag! You make me tired. If my hands were not tied I would soon show you that you couldn't twist my neck, although you do seem to be more a man than a woman, you wretched bag of bones!"

"Come on with you!" and the Mexican, with a violent pull, fairly dragged the young woman into the loathsome hut.

And as the two disappeared within, the road-agent chief remarked to his follower:

"I reckon that gal ain't far wrong when she says she kin handle Mother Castro if she had a fair show."

"I haven't forgotten how she pounced on me the day I stopped the coach on the trail. She gave me all the fight I wanted for a minute or two. But as her hands are tied she don't stand any chance this time."

"Nary chance!"

But it is the unexpected which always happens, the French say.

Mignon's hands apparently were tied in the most secure manner. The ruffian had taken pains to make the job a good one.

But he was dealing with a woman of marvelous wit, courage and resources; so when the fellow was binding her wrists together she had spread them a little apart, but so cunningly that the man was not conscious of the fact.

As Mignon's wrists were large—for she was, in truth, much more muscular than an ordinary man—thanks to this trick which she had played upon the road-agent, by a dexterous movement of her hands as she followed the Mexican woman into the hut, she freed one wrist of the bonds, placing the wrist under the one upon which the lariat still remained, and thus kept the movement from the knowledge of the Mexican woman.

The female barber, always keenly appreciative of a joke, could not help chuckling to herself as she reflected what a surprise there was in store for her captor.

The room into which the Gringo was conducted was only about ten feet square. A small window high up in the front wall over the door afforded light.

The window had been placed in this peculiar position so as to prevent the intrusion of wild beasts; and for this reason, also, the door had been constructed of stout planks, carefully braced by cross-pieces, and opening outward.

The quick eyes of the girl had noted all these facts, for as she intended to give battle, it was necessary for her to carefully study the lay of the ground.

The apartment could not boast of much in the way of furniture. There was a small bunk in one corner, composed of pine boughs, with a blanket spread over them; a rude table and a couple of dilapidated boxes, that served for chairs.

After going through the door, the Mexican woman stepped to one side to allow her prisoner to pass, and as she did so she closed the door and took a position before it.

"Now, then, just understand right at the beginning that there isn't going to be any foolishness about this business!" the Mexican informed her charge; "so if you know when you are well off you will submit quietly and not force me to use harsh measures."

"Oh, you will find me as docile as a lamb!" Mignon assured, but as she spoke she cast her glance upon the floor to hide the lurking devil which she felt sure was in her eyes.

"You are now helpless in the power of a man who would not hesitate to kill you if it suited his purpose. Human life is nothing to him; so if you are wise you

will not provoke him. He has told you what he wants, so give it and save me the trouble of searching you."

"Ah, yes; but you are asking me something that I can't do, you know. I don't know where he got the idea that I have in my possession papers which concern him, but he is away off, and I cannot possibly give you what I have not got, you know."

"If that was the truth it would be all right," the Mexican woman retorted; "but it isn't, and you can't deceive us no matter how cunning you are. You have the papers so carefully concealed, I suppose, that you feel sure they cannot be discovered, but I will soon show you that you have made a mistake in regard to that. I am a rare hand at smelling out anything of this kind, for I used to be in the custom service when I was young, and many is the cunning smuggler that I have caught. I know all the hiding places. I have found diamonds sewn up in the hem of a skirt, quilted in a waist, or a bodice, or concealed in a false shoe sole."

And, as the woman spoke, she watched the face of the girl closely.

"Oh, I don't doubt that you are exceedingly smart and clever, and all that sort of thing," Mignon acknowledged; "but it is certain that if I haven't got a secret you will not be able to discover it, no matter how cunning you may be."

"It isn't any use for me to waste time with you!" the Mexican exclaimed, in an angry tone.

"Not the slightest use!" Mignon assured, with perfect sang-froid.

"But I will find what I am after, though!"

"I would be willing to bet you a hundred pesos that you will not do anything of the kind!" the girl bantered.

"Bah! I will find the papers if I have to strip every rag off that you have on!"

"Go ahead! but you will only have your labor for your pains!" Mignon persisted.

The Mexican, now decidedly angry, came at her prisoner in an ugly way, but, as she advanced, Mignon retreated a step; then, to the other's astonishment, she delivered a "right hand swing," to use the boxing term, which caught the woman full on the point of the jaw and sent her spinning against the door.

As the Mexican had merely pulled the door to as she had passed through, it was not fastened, and the moment the woman's weight came against it the heavy portal flew open and the half-breed went headlong through the opening, coming to the ground just outside the hut.

The two outlaws, of course, were taken completely by surprise. Anticipating that the searching of the captive would take some time, the pair had paced away from the hut about fifty feet distant, when the violent opening of the door, followed by the Mexican woman coming out headforemost, warned them that the unexpected, indeed, had happened.

Little time had they for thought, though, for no sooner had the half-breed measured her length upon the ground than Mignon sprang through the doorway, a revolver gleaming in her hand.

The outlaws had not taken the precaution to have their prisoner searched and so she had been able to retain the revolvers which she always carried in her breast.

The road-agents also had their weapons out—they were two to one—two determined fellows, used to crime and bloodshed, against one woman; but Mignon, the moment she appeared in the doorway, blazed away at the pair and charged them with as much fury and courage as though she had a regiment at her back.

The outlaws fired a couple of shots as the girl came on—their nerves rendered so unsteady by the desperate act of the female barber that their bullets did not go within a yard of the girl.

Then, after firing the shots, a sudden panic took possession of them and both turned and fled at the top of their speed, leaving Mignon in possession of the field.

The girl uttered a shout of triumph and sent a couple of shots whistling after the runaways, which served to increase their speed.

"Upon my word these rascals haven't any more heart than a couple of rabbits!" Mignon exclaimed in contempt, as she fired.

But she did not attempt to pursue the pair, for at the edge of the clearing they would gain the shelter of the wood, and so be under cover.

Therefore, as soon as she fired the two last shots she plunged into the pines on the right hand side of the clearing.

The road-agents, gaining the shelter of the wood, of course were not able to see the girl.

"She has taken to the timber!" cried the outlaw leader.

"Yes, and that gal is a born devil, if ever there was one!" the other declared.

"She is a hustler and no mistake."

"Let us get out. There isn't any use of our stopping here, for the chances are big that she is crawling through the pines after us now."

"Oh, I don't hardly think that she will try a game of that sort, although from what I have seen of her I think she has enough of the dare-devil in her to try almost anything," the outlaw leader observed.

"Not a doubt of it; so let us vamose as soon as possible," and at once both hurried along the trail.

But the girl had no idea of pursuing the rascals through a strange country. Under the circumstances discretion was the better part of valor, and so she permitted the scoundrels to go on their way unmolested.

"It will be a difficult job enough for me to get out of this wood and find my way back to the camp without my bothering my head about this precious pair," Mignon decided, as she struck off in the direction in which she supposed the town of Bearopolis to be situated.

As it happened, the wood was an open one, with but few bushes standing here and there in clumps, so Mignon had no difficulty in going onward, and after a while she came to where the trail to the Red Gopher mine split off from the main road.

"Now I am all right!" she exclaimed; "and I can put away my pop-gun."

Mignon had proceeded through the wood, her revolver in her hand, the hammer up ready for action.

"This second little episode with the road-agents has come to an end, and, so far, I can truthfully say that I have got altogether the best of the bargain," she murmured, thoughtfully, as she proceeded along the trail to the camp; "but is there going to be any more of this sort of thing?"

"If there is, I must be on my guard, and it is about time that I took an innings, I think, but the question arises—how can I get at my men—how can I counter on their game?"

By this time Mignon had come within sight of the camp, coming around a bend in the trail, and as she did so, she caught sight of Pale Jack, who was seated upon a boulder by the roadside, engaged in taking the cartridges out of his shotgun.

"Just the man I wanted to see!" muttered the girl, "for I have some information for him, and he undoubtedly will be able to give me some."

"Been shooting?" she inquired, as she came up and took a seat on a near boulder as she spoke.

"Yes, but I didn't succeed in getting any game," the gambler answered. "I reckon some one must have been ahead of me and scared the game away, for I usually succeed in getting something, although the shooting is not as good as it used to be, for the camp is growing steadily and the more men the more hunters, of course."

"Yes, naturally," Mignon coincided.

"By the way, I have been making a call," she added, abruptly.

"A call?"

"Yes, I have been up to the Red Gopher mine," the girl explained.

The gambler at once became interested. "To the Red Gopher mine, eh?" he repeated.

"Yes, and there I made the acquaintance of Miss Margaret Vanderbilt," and the woman from the East related at length the particulars of the interview.

Pale Jack listened with the greatest interest.

"Well! well! It seems to me that the young lady will need the aid of some good friend very soon," the gambler remarked.

"No doubt about that, but as she is a stranger here, there are only about two people in the camp upon whom she can depend."

"You are one of the two I presume?" a grave expression upon his face.

"Yes, and you are the other!"

Pale Jack cast his eyes on the ground, a troubled expression on his face.

"Well, frankly, I would be willing to do all I can to aid the young lady," was his response; "but the question is—would she be willing to accept assistance from such a man as I am?"

"If she was a Western girl, now, possibly she would not object, for the women who are raised out in this region are not so thin-skinned and particular in regard to gamblers as the girls who are brought up in the East."

"I am aware of that fact, but I think this young lady is so much in need of friends that she will be glad of your aid."

"She shall have it if I have to fight the whole town!" Pale Jack promptly avowed.

"I am not going to beat about the bush with you in this matter!" Mignon promptly declared. "I assume that you have taken a fancy to the girl, and I have a shrewd suspicion that she rather likes you."

A faint flush appeared on the pale face of the sport and there was a glad light in his keen eyes.

"I am very much obliged to you!" he returned; "and as I believe in going on the square, every time, I admit that the information has given me a deal of pleasure."

"You see I am rather a peculiar fellow," he added, after a brief pause. "I am not much of a ladies' man. Not that I do not admire the fair sex, for I do, but my life has been such that I have never had many opportunities for enjoying good female society."

"I will add: I am a foundling without the slightest idea of who my parents were. Thirty years ago I was left on the doorstep of one of the biggest gaming houses in San Francisco, and when the servant reported the find the owner of the gambling house, with the superstition of his class, regarded it as a good omen."

"I will be hanged if I don't have the kid brought up like a gentleman!" the old sport at once decided.

"Sporting men, as a rule, are disposed to be liberal in matters of this kind. He looked after me as carefully as though I was his own son; and, as he despised deception of all kinds, he never attempted to conceal the nature of his business from me, although he did his best to keep me from following it."

"He gave me a good start in life; but fate had evidently determined that I must follow in the footsteps of my benefactor, for ill luck attended all my efforts until I became a sport."

CHAPTER XVII.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

Mignon had listened with the utmost attention to the gambler's story.

"There is a good deal in fate, after all," the girl remarked. "We often hear about self-made men, and every once in a while some who have attained in winning success will indulge in vigorous boasting of their abilities, but, in the majority of cases, if the truth were known, it was some stroke of fortune that elevated them to place and power."

"No doubt about that," Pale Jack responded. "I never was cut out for a

business man; the confinement and humdrum method of the life did not suit me; I was cut out for a rover, and after trying commercial life for three years, I went in for a sport."

"I suppose it was designed that there should be sports and flats, just as there are wolves and rabbits, hawks and pigeons," Mignon assumed.

"Yes, I suppose so; but, really, I never troubled my head to speculate about the matter. I accepted the fact that such things were without question."

"So, under the circumstances, I did not seek women's society, and decided that I was cut out for a bachelor; but now I have encountered Miss Vanderbilt, I realize that if I could get a woman like her for my wife my life would be a happier one than it is at present."

"I am glad we have canvassed this matter," he added abruptly, "for I am satisfied that your judgment is good; and, although, as a whole, I never bother anybody by asking advice, yet in this affair I was rather puzzled, for I never was mixed up in a matter of the kind before."

"My advice to you is to go in and win!" Mignon encouraged. "The way the girl is situated, she needs a close friend the worst kind of way. A drunken father, in feeble health, liable to be taken away at any time, and when he is gone she will be utterly helpless."

"Her father is in the snares of this superintendent, this Caretta, and it is evidently his intention to fix matters so as to secure both the girl and the old man's property."

"That seems to be his game."

"I don't know anything about this Caretta, for I have never seen him, but, judging from the girl's description, he is one of these scheming Mexicans who are apt to prove to be extremely dangerous customers."

"Well, now that you speak of the man, it suddenly occurs to me that I never have seen him, although he has been in the camp for some time."

Mignon was surprised by this announcement.

"Well, that certainly is strange," she exclaimed.

"Yes, it is. I never happened to think about the matter before, but it is odd that the man should have been in the camp for a couple of months—in fact, I don't know that he has been here longer than that—and I never chanced to meet him."

"My place, you know, is the principal saloon in the town—in fact, I am first, and the rest nowhere; and so the men of the camp come there just as in a big city men go to the principal hotels and clubs to gossip and hear the news."

"Is there another man in the camp occupying as prominent a position as this man whom you do not know?" Mignon asked.

"Not one!" Pale Jack assured.

"Don't it strike you that Mr. Caretta is not particularly anxious to cut a prominent figure in the camp?"

"That is about the way it looks."

"Possibly he has some good reason for wishing to keep in the background," the girl suggested.

"It certainly has that appearance, for in a camp like this the superintendent of a prosperous mining concern usually considers himself one of the big men of the town, and therefore is seldom backward about showing himself."

"It is strange, but I ought not to be surprised at anything which occurs in this camp, for the adventures I have had have opened my eyes."

The gambler surveyed Mignon with an inquiring look.

The girl related her adventures.

"Well, you certainly have had your share," Pale Jack declared.

"The rascals seem to have made a dead set at you, and yet you don't present the appearance of carrying around a great amount of money with you."

"It isn't money they are after, but some papers which they seem to think I have concealed."

"When my trunk was ripped open nothing was taken, but even the very lining was slit open under the idea, I suppose,

that the documents might be hidden somewhere under it.

"Have these road-agents ever operated much in the neighborhood of this camp?" she queried.

"No. There has been a couple of robberies, but they did not amount to much, since I have been in the town," Pale Jack replied. "Twice the stage has been held up, but as there was no Express money on board, and the passengers were about broke, the toll-gatherers didn't collect much wealth."

"Well, I am getting tired of this sort of thing!" the girl announced, with an air of determination. "And I am going to put a stop to it."

"I don't like the idea of these fellows playing Jack-in-the-box with me, and jumping out whenever they think they can catch me at a disadvantage."

"I have always been able to paddle my own canoe pretty well, and I flatter myself that I will soon show the rogues their mistake when they trouble themselves about me."

"But I shall need some assistance; and, as I am a stranger in this rough region, without a friend to whom I can turn—"

"Oh, no," Pale Jack interrupted. "You must not say that. I am your friend, and you are welcome to call on me for the best in the shop. You can bet your life that you will get it, too."

"Thanks!"

"You rather went out of your way to do me a good turn with Miss Vanderbilt, and, as one good turn deserves another, I am willing to do anything in my power to square the account."

"I will accept the offer in the same frank spirit in which it is given," Mignon assured; "and, with your assistance, I know that I will be able to give these rascals a lesson which will last them for life."

"Call upon me freely for anything you want; and I will only be too glad to oblige you!" Pale Jack avowed.

"I made up my mind right from the beginning that I would call these scoundrels to an account. So I have been on the alert, keeping my eyes open, and I now think I know a way to get at my men."

"That is good!" and Pale Jack showed that he was very much interested.

"Do you know anything about this John Bickerstaff—the man they call Sandy?" Mignon asked.

"No, not much," the gambler replied. "It is my impression, though, that he does not bear a particularly good reputation, being a sort of a two-cent gambler, who is always on the lookout to rope in some tenderfoot, or a man so drunk as not to be able to take care of himself in a game."

"He works in the Red Gopher mine?"

"Yes, come to think of it, I believe he does; but, as I said, I do not know much about him, for he does not come into my place very often."

"He knows very well that he can't try any of his skin games in there, for I will not have anybody robbed in my place if I know it."

"If you will recall the particulars of this affair, you will see that this Sandy has played a prominent part in the matter," Mignon remarked. "It was he who made my acquaintance at Silver City and professed to take a great interest in my welfare."

"Yes, and that was a suspicious circumstance, too, for the fellow isn't the sort of chap to go out of the way to help anybody," the gambler averred.

"From the developments which have taken place I am satisfied that Bickerstaff was on the lookout for a female passenger on the train. I answered the description, and he immediately proceeded to make himself as agreeable as possible. Having ascertained that I intended to come to Bearopolis by the stage, he took passage by the same conveyance, and it is my idea that he was connected with the road-agent attack."

"Now, then, if I call Mr. Sandy to an account, don't I stand a chance to get at the heart of the mystery?"

"I think so," the gambler assented; "and, as I have said, if I can be of any service to you, do not hesitate to call upon

me. I will be pleased to aid you to the utmost of my ability."

"I shall need assistance," Mignon replied, in her frank way, and she proceeded to explain what she required.

The gambler was rather surprised by the boldness of the scheme which the girl had in view, and said as much.

"Yes; I know it is a little out of the common run, but then I am not an ordinary woman, you know; the bolder the game the better I like it."

This brought the interview to an end, and the pair separated.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A GALLANT CAPTAIN.

When Mignon reached her shop she found a horse tied to a tree in the immediate neighborhood.

From the trappings it was evident that the owner of the horse was a soldier—an officer.

Mignon gave no particular heed to the circumstance, for she did not think it concerned her in the least, but as she unlocked the door of her shop, Captain McIntyre made his appearance from Pale Jack's saloon.

"Good afternoon, Miss Lawrence," and he removed his hat in an extra polite bow as he spoke.

"I was sorely afraid that you were not coming back this afternoon, after I had taken the trouble, too, to ride over from the fort for the express purpose of seeing you."

"Really, I feel flattered," the girl replied, with a pleasant smile.

But this was merely a polite fiction. She did not feel complimented at all, for there was a familiarity of manner and tone in the captain's address which she did not fancy.

"Yes, my dear Miss Lawrence, I have ridden all the way from the post to test your skill as a barber," McIntyre explained.

"We have a barber at the post, of course—a tolerably good one, but when I thought of your fairy fingers I couldn't endure the idea of submitting to the manipulations of his clumsy paws."

By this time Mignon had entered the shop; her back was to the officer, so that he could not see her face, which wore an expression of annoyance and disgust.

From the freedom of his speech she assumed that he had been drinking, and, therefore, she did not relish a conversation with him, but as he had come for a shave she thought the quickest way to get rid of him would be to comply with his wish.

"Take a chair, and I will attend to you in a twinkling," she returned, in a business-like way, and immediately proceeded to get her shaving materials ready.

"Certainly—of course," and the captain at once took the chair.

"Really, now, I anticipate a decided treat—to be shaved by the delicate fingers of such a divine—The deuce!"

This abrupt end of the sentence was due to the fact that Mignon, in putting the towel around the captain's neck, had suddenly drawn it so tight that for the moment the officer was almost strangled.

"What is the matter—is it too tight?" the girl asked, innocently.

"Ah, ugh! By Jove! you know, you got the deuced towel so tight that I could hardly breathe!" the captain spluttered.

"Oh, well, little mistakes of that kind will happen."

"Yes, I presume so. But, I say, do be a little careful, for I came to be shaved and not hanged, you understand!" And the captain laughed loudly at his joke.

"Yes, I will be careful. Put back your head," Mignon instructed.

"Certainly; of course; but, as I was saying, it is a great privilege to be transferred from the hands of a clumsy clown of a barber to the fairy fingers of such an angel as—Ah! the deuce!"

The captain sat bolt upright and spluttered away at a great rate, while he made frantic attempts to wipe his eyes.

Mignon made a gesture of impatience.

"Oh! come now! How do you suppose I am going to shave you if you don't keep quiet?" she queried.

"Death and the deuce!" the captain cried, still spitting away at a great rate. "You have filled both my eyes and mouth with soap!"

This was the truth. With a couple of dabs of her brush, she had "pasted" the gallant officer in his eyes, and then, taking advantage of the fact that his mouth was open, giving utterance to the compliment, she had given him a fearful dose of lather.

"Well, well! You don't mean to say that I got the soap in your eyes and mouth?" Mignon asked, as if for information.

By this time the captain had succeeded in spitting out the lather and had wiped the soap out of his eyes, although the smart remained.

"By Jove! I never got such a dose before in all my life!" McIntyre declared, dolefully.

"It was all your own fault, for you made me so nervous by your talking that I really did not know what I was doing," Mignon explained, smiling blandly in the face of the discomfited gallant; "but, sir, put down our head, and I will promise to be very careful, only you mustn't talk," she urged.

The captain again assumed a reclining position, saying as he did so:

"Oh, yes, but that spoils half the fun, you know, if a fellow can't talk to you."

"Not a bit of it," Mignon retorted. "I am one of the new style of barbers, you see, who attend strictly to business, and have no time for idle conversation."

"Ah, yes, I see; but—"

"If you don't keep your mouth shut you'll get another dose of the soap, the first thing you know," Mignon warned.

And, as it was, the captain did get a little of the lather again in his mouth.

"All right—all right!" he hastened to acquiesce; "I will keep quiet until you finish the lathering process, and then, while you are shaving we can indulge in a little delightful conversation."

"Yes, if you don't mind being sliced a bit while the conversation is going on," Mignon responded, sharpening a razor on a strop with a dexterous hand.

"Sliced a bit!" the captain repeated, in amazement.

"Yes, if you don't mind parting with a bit of your cheek or a chunk from your chin, because, just so sure as you get me nervous by talking to me, the chances are that I will cut you in a dozen places," and with a flourish she commenced the shaving operation.

"All right! all right! I will be as dumb as an oyster, but, for Heaven's sake, be careful!" the captain urged.

And, mentally, he cursed the folly which had led him to trust himself in the hands of the female barber, for the captain had a very high opinion of his own personal attractions, and it would have been a dreadful mishap if he had been forced to go about with a face disfigured with bits of court plaster.

"You are all right, and I am all right, as long as you keep quiet," Mignon announced. "But I give you fair warning that if you open your mouth to talk I will not be responsible for the consequences."

"I understand; all right," the officer responded, and he was as good as his word.

Mignon really was skillful with the razor, and when she had finished the shave the captain felt well satisfied with her work.

"You certainly are a better barber than the man at the post," he declared, as he rose to an upright position and surveyed himself with a deal of satisfaction.

"I see that I did not make any mistake when I took the trouble to ride over and try your skill, although I must say that my eyes are still smarting like the deuce and my mouth feels as if I had been eating soap for a week." And the captain made a grimace.

"You will soon get over that," the female barber assured, as she proceeded to arrange the officer's hair.

Mignon, as a hair-dresser, was a success, and the captain was delighted.

McIntyre had curly hair, which he wore rather long, and so the girl had a chance to show her skill and taste.

"By Jove, Miss Lawrence, you are a

genius with the brush and comb!" the captain avowed, as he rose to his feet.

"I reckon I will pass, in a crowd," the girl responded, with a laugh.

"How much am I indebted to you?" and the captain drew a handful of silver from his pocket.

"A quarter."

"Cheap enough, in all conscience; but, really, considering the extra labor which you have put on my hair, I think I ought to make it half a dollar," and he tendered the girl a fifty-cent piece.

"Oh, no; a quarter is all I am entitled to," Mignon replied, with decision.

"Upon my word, you are an extraordinary young woman! Don't you know that every well regulated barber is always ready to take a tip from a pleased customer?"

"Ah, yes; but I am a true-blue American, and don't believe in tips," was the retort. "That is an imported custom—a European notion, and I do not take any stock in it, so a quarter is all I care to accept."

"I think you are one of the most independent young women I ever encountered," the captain averred, as he tendered the barber a quarter in place of the half.

"Thank you." And Mignon, accepting the piece, slipped it into her pocket.

"As to being independent," she continued, "that goes without saying. If I wasn't I don't think I would be getting my living in any such way as this."

"Very true; no doubt about that," the captain acceded; "and, do you know, I don't see how you can content yourself to lead such a life."

"Because it is the best thing I can do at present."

"Oh, I don't know about that. A young and pretty woman like yourself ought not to have any trouble in picking up a husband who would support her in fine style," and as he spoke the captain attempted to pass his arm around the girl's waist.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DISCOMFITED MAN.

"None of that! Hands off!" Mignon cried, evading the officer's grasp.

"Oh, come, now! don't be hard-hearted!" the captain pleaded, advancing with outstretched arms.

"Keep away! I don't allow any foolishness of that kind!" Mignon warned. "Behave yourself like a gentleman while in my shop, or else I shall be under the unpleasant necessity of throwing you out!" and as she spoke the female barber "squared" off at the captain in true pugilistic style.

The officer was decidedly astonished, but, both obstinate and vain, he would not be bluffed, perhaps believing that the woman was playing the coquette with him.

"Aha! that is a challenge, eh?" he exclaimed.

"No, it isn't!" Mignon retorted. "It is a warning, and if you are wise you will govern yourself accordingly."

"You really don't mean to say that you would attempt to put me out if I make myself obnoxious to you?" the captain asked in surprise.

"Certainly I would; and you mustn't make any mistake about the matter, either!"

"I am not one of the die-away kind of girls who are not able to take care of themselves; quite the contrary, for I have been brought up in a rough school and am fully able to take my own part."

"By Jove! Miss Lawrence, do you know you really look beautiful when you assume that position, with the color in your cheeks and your eyes flashing? Ah, I must have a kiss if I die for it!" cried the gallant captain, impetuously, and he sprang forward with the idea of clasping the girl in his arms for the kiss.

But Mignon was on the alert for just such a movement. With wonderful alacrity she dodged under the captain's arm, rushed to the door and flung it open—not with any idea of escaping, though, as the officer quickly discovered.

He was prompt to follow her, but, as he again endeavored to clasp her in his

arms, with the palms of her open hands she gave him two terrific slaps in the face, that fairly caused the tears to start in the man's eyes.

He recoiled in amazement, tinged with disgust, but as she made a movement as though to repeat the blows, the officer involuntarily threw out his hands to keep her off.

Instantly Mignon darted under his arm, and, before McIntyre had an idea of what she was about to do, she had him by the back of the collar and he found himself rapidly propelled across the room in the direction of the open door.

And the joke of the thing was that the officer, strong man as he was, was perfectly unable to help himself. He was as powerless in the grasp of the muscular and agile young woman as though he had been a half-grown boy.

Out through the door he went, the violence of the shock carrying him down on his knees in the middle of the street.

This abrupt appearance of the captain, of course, attracted the attention of everybody in the street, and all who witnessed the affair gazed, open-mouthed, in wonder.

That there was nothing serious, however, in this eruption, was apparent from the fact that Mignon stood in the shop door with a smile on her face.

The discomfited officer was angry enough to kill the barber on the spot, but was sensible enough to understand that if he displayed his rage it would only render himself the laughing stock of the town.

With a great effort, therefore, he concealed his rage, rose to his feet, drew out his handkerchief, dusted his clothes, then waved it at the lady of the razor, and, forcing a smile, said:

"You got decidedly the best of me this time, miss, but I ought to have known better than to have attempted to measure strength with such a spitfire as you are. Ta! ta! until I see you again!"

Then the officer mounted his horse and departed, his heart full of the chagrin of defeat and mortified pride.

"Confound the vixen!" he muttered, as he galloped out of the place. "I never encountered such a woman in all my life!"

"I have been treated to some unpleasant surprises in my time, but I will be hanged if I don't think that this was one of the greatest and most disgusting I ever experienced."

"And the girl, too, is not only apparently as strong as an ox, but is as quick as a flash."

"By Jove! A professional pugilist, used to all the tricks of the boxer's art, could not have delivered two better slaps."

The captain shook his head in a grave way as he reflected upon the affair.

"I am afraid I will have to stand considerable roasting on account of the affair, particularly if the girl should take it into her head to tell just how the thing happened."

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added:

"No, I don't believe she will give anybody an opportunity to poke fun at me; she is not that kind of a person. Confound the minx, though! I will never be satisfied until I have a chance to get square with her!"

He was right in his conjecture; Mignon was not a woman who went out of her way to make enemies, so when the people inquired concerning what had taken place, she laughed, as she answered:

"Oh, Captain McIntyre and I were only having a little scrap together; that is all."

And with this explanation the gossips of the camp were forced to be content.

CHAPTER XX.

CARETTA SHOWS HIS HAND.

There was a small shanty on the Red Gopher property which was dignified by the title of office.

It was also the abode of the superintendent of the mine, who kept house

there after the primitive fashion common to the mining region.

Bickerstaff likewise had a bunk in the shanty, and, in fact, his own hands did about all the work which was done in the housekeeping line.

In the evening after supper, old Jonathan Vanderbilt usually paid the pair a visit.

The superintendent always had a bottle of good whisky on hand, and after the three had a few drinks, and had discussed the events of the day, cards would be produced and a little game of poker played.

It was only a friendly game—just to pass the time away, as all three of them were wont to remark, but, once in a while, when the old man got excited, the three staked their money as recklessly as any veteran gamblers could have done.

And it was true that, whenever Vanderbilt drank a little more than usual, then he was anxious to play for high stakes.

"Don't let us play any little two-cent game!" he would insist, with the air of a millionaire. "Let us have the stakes high enough to make the game interesting."

Which the others were always ready to do.

On this particular night when we introduce the three to the reader, they had been playing for nearly four hours, for the little alarm clock, ticking away on the wall, showed that the midnight hour was near.

The game had been a far more desperate one than usual, for old Vanderbilt had been drinking freely right from the beginning of the encounter, and the more he drank the more determined he was to play for big stakes.

The old fellow was one of those peculiar men who could drink a large quantity of liquor without, apparently, being much affected by it. He never appeared to be drunk—never staggered, nor talked with a thickened speech. At such times his utterance merely became slower and he was unusually dignified.

When sober he was, at best, but a poor poker player, and therefore it is plain that, when his brains were muddled with liquor, he was no match for his opponents.

And what more than anything else rendered the old mine owner "a dead easy game," to use the sporting phrase, was his belief that, as a card-player, he had no superior in the territory. When the whisky began to get in its work, he began to boast and push the play.

His companions humored him in this, of course, and always expressed their belief in his skill and luck—that he was the best gamester they had ever encountered.

And equally, of course, all the while the old man was losing steadily.

His cash had been exhausted early on this particular evening, and now he was playing on I O U's.

Of course he was being cheated outrageously, but had no suspicion of the fact.

The two men were in league to cheat their employer, but he, in his blindness, had no suspicion of the fact.

The fellows worked the game quite skillfully, too. They were careful not to win all the time, but whenever the old man captured a "pot" it was sure to be a small one, while Caretta was, as a rule, lucky enough to capture all the big stakes.

Bickerstaff was, apparently, just as unlucky as Vanderbilt, and fully as heavy a loser.

So the two losers consoled with each other—the burden of their talk being that no man ever had such an extraordinary run of luck before.

"Yes, that is just it," Vanderbilt assumed. "A man can't win if the cards don't come in his hand, and it doesn't matter how skillful a player he is."

Both the others agreed to this, and Caretta observed:

"Really, Mr. Vanderbilt, you play about as good a game of poker as I ever

saw, but if fortune frowns upon you persistently it is not possible for you to win."

Then Caretta happened to glance at the clock:

"Hello! It is nearly twelve!" he exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so late!"

"Is it too late for us to have another hand?" the old man asked, with a wistful look.

"Oh, yes; we might as well take a parting drink as a 'night-cap' and then go to bed," Caretta advised.

"And, by the by, we might as well figure up and see how we stand," he suggested, and taking out a memorandum book and pencil, he figured up the amount of the I O U's.

"I suppose that I must owe you a small fortune," the old man intimated, with a grimace of disgust, "for I have been losing heavily for over two weeks, now."

"It has been an awful run of ill-luck and no mistake!" Caretta declared.

"But it is a long lane which has no turning, and your luck must change some time."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so, but there is no doubt that for the last fifteen or twenty years I have had a dreadful bad run of luck," the old man dolefully remarked.

"Why, gentlemen, twenty years ago I was a rich man—so much so that I had an income upon which I could live like a prince; but it is the old story, you know; I was not satisfied to let well enough alone. I was not content with what I had, but wanted to be richer, so I speculated, and the result is that to-day all I have in the world is this mine."

"It is certainly an excellent property, and you ought to be satisfied," the superintendent observed.

"Oh, no; a man who has once been worth a couple of hundred thousands is seldom willing to be satisfied with a paltry twenty or thirty thousand dollars," Vanderbilt responded in a grandiloquent way.

"I feel most wretchedly poor; and then, too, I have been making a little mental calculation in regard to this amount which I owe you."

"I have an excellent head for figures, you understand, and, although I have not been extra particular in keeping an account of how things have been going, yet it is my impression that I now owe you about ten thousand dollars."

"I hardly think the amount is as large as that, but I can give you the exact figures in a moment," the superintendent replied.

"I am a very methodical fellow, always making it a rule to set down the details in a book, so that I can get at the correct figures at any time."

And, as he spoke, Caretta scrutinized the small memorandum book carefully for a little while.

"Well, well; I am surprised!" he exclaimed, at length, looking up from the book.

"Your statement in regard to the amount is about correct. The exact figure is nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty dollars."

"I told you that it was about ten thousand dollars," the old man observed.

"I tell you what it is, Caretta, the governor has a wonderful head for figures!" Bickerstaff averred, with a glance of wondering admiration.

"Oh, yes; no mistake about that," the superintendent assented.

"It is just as I was telling the boys up at the hotel last night. They were talking about smart business men, and I just gave them to understand that, when it came down to good solid work, Mr. Vanderbilt here could hold his own with any man in the town."

The old gentleman was much pleased by these complimentary remarks.

He closed one eye, winked in a mysterious way with the other, shook his head in a grave style, as he said:

"The sharps of this town understand by this time that I am up to snuff. Just look at this little Red Gopher mine business, for instance! I bought the prop-

erty for a thousand dollars, and the man who sold it to me had an idea that he was getting the best of the bargain. I was a stranger, and he tried to carry out the Scriptural adage, which says to take the stranger in," and the old man chuckled at the joke.

"Oh, yes; he took you to be a tenderfoot, and intended to stick you beyond a doubt," Caretta assented.

"I have heard that he went around the town after the sale was made, bragging about the good trade which he had made, asserting that the mine was played out and wasn't worth a thousand cents, let alone dollars," Bickerstaff put in.

"He was a sharper, but not sharp enough to get the best of a gentleman about my size when it came to a trade," the old man boasted, with another series of chuckles.

"You see, boys, when it comes to shrewd calculation and careful planning I am all right, but when I am called upon to rise superior to all sorts of bad luck, then, of course, it is not possible for me to always succeed."

"Certainly not!" Caretta exclaimed. "Mortal man cannot fight fate."

"No, it is not to be expected," Bickerstaff agreed.

"That is the reason why I have come out so badly in this card business," Vanderbilt explained.

"But your luck must change some time, you know," the superintendent urged. "You are certainly one of the best losers that I ever struck, and it is my experience that when a man is a real, true, dead game sport, he is bound to come out a winner in the long run."

"That is true," the old man acquiesced. "No doubt about it, and you can bet your life that I am the kind of man to stick to the game just as long as there is a chance to win."

"And, as for this little amount due me, you need not let that trouble you, for the chances are great that if we keep up our little game for another month I will owe you money instead of your owing me," Caretta insinuated.

"Oh, yes; that is possible," the old man assented, complacently.

"Or, I will tell you a way in which we might arrange the affair," the superintendent observed, abruptly, just as if an idea had suddenly come to him. "I will be glad to buy an interest in the mine. I will take a quarter interest and give you ten thousand dollars for it, that is counting the mine to be worth forty thousand dollars."

The old man looked surprised.

"Really, Caretta, I must say that this is an extremely liberal offer," Vanderbilt avowed, "for the property has never been valued at so great a sum as that."

"Yes, it is setting a high price upon the mine, and I will be frank enough to say that I don't really think the property is worth it, yet I have an idea that, by a little judicious management, I might be able to get forty thousand dollars out of somebody for it."

A cunning look appeared upon Vanderbilt's face and he nodded his head sagely as he returned:

"My dear fellow, you are perfectly welcome to go ahead, as far as I am concerned; and in strict confidence I will say that I would be glad to get thirty thousand dollars for the Red Gopher claim."

"Yes, it seems to me thirty thousand would be a good price for the property," Bickerstaff supplemented.

"Well, I look at the matter in this way: The value of a mine depends upon the product and the prospect," the superintendent explained. "Just now the way the Red Gopher is turning out the pay dirt would justify the keenest mining sharp in giving twenty thousand for the property."

"Yes, yes," the others assented.

"And as the ore has been growing steadily richer for the last two months a sanguine man might get the idea into his head that, in a short time, the mine would develop into a regular bonanza."

"But, on the other hand, there is the

danger that the pay ore may peter out at any moment," Bickerstaff argued.

"There has never been any very valuable strike made in this district, and the veteran miners—the practical, scientific chaps—the fellows who understand all about the matter from A to ampersand—give it as their opinion that no big discovery will ever be made," the superintendent remarked.

"The nature of the ground is opposed to it; so it is not likely that any mine in this neighborhood will ever make millionaires out of its owners; but, as man is a credulous animal, who is fond of big yarns, there always will be people to believe that bonanza strikes will be made in this district, no matter what the men of experience say about the matter."

"At the present time the Red Gopher property is enjoying a boom, and it is my idea that you would be wise to take advantage of it," Caretta argued.

"Everybody in the town knows that we have struck some rich ore, and I have done my best in a quiet way to give the impression that the mine is panning out extremely well," the superintendent explained.

"Now, then, wouldn't it be a good idea to take advantage of the boom to get rid of the property at a big figure?"

Old Vanderbilt pursed up his lips and looked wise.

"Well, well, I don't know but what you are right," he said.

"I have got the scheme all planned," the superintendent remarked, "and I think the game can be worked without any difficulty."

"Put the mine in the hands of a stock company, and bond it for forty thousand dollars."

"Your object in doing this is to raise money to go ahead on a big scale, as you are satisfied that there is big money in it."

"All you wish to dispose of is a three-quarter interest, as you are satisfied you can make more money out of a quarter interest when you get the thing in working order than you can out of the entire plant the way you are compelled to run it now."

"Yes, yes; I comprehend," Vanderbilt exclaimed, rubbing his hands gleefully together.

"When a man makes a move of this kind he always ought to be prepared to give a good reason for it."

"But, my dear Caretta, do you think we will be able to get as much as forty thousand dollars?" the old gentleman asked, evidently having considerable doubt about the matter.

"Forty thousand is an extremely large sum to bond the mine for when the original cost is considered," Vanderbilt added.

"Well, it is considerable of a raise, but then the mine has developed wonderfully, you know," the superintendent replied, with a cynical laugh.

"But do you think we will be able to convince our customers that the mine has improved enough to warrant such an advance?" the old gentleman asked, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I think so," Caretta responded.

"You must understand, of course, that if the game can't be worked in one way it must be in another."

"I don't think that I exactly comprehend your meaning," the old gentleman remarked, evidently a little puzzled.

"Why, the mine must be carefully 'salted,' so that an examination will satisfy any one that she is turning out a very rich grade of ore," the superintendent explained.

The old man chuckled, and then nodded his head in a wise way.

"Yes, yes; I understand you now. I have heard of salted mines before," he remarked.

"In fact, after I bought the Red Gopher property I was informed by a dozen or two of these mining sharps that I had been swindled, for the mine had been salted on me."

"I do not doubt that it was the truth, for I have been told that the men who sold you the property considered that it had about petered out," Caretta observed.

"But mining is a mighty uncertain sort

of business, and in it the unexpected is always happening.

"To come right to the solid truth, ten or fifteen thousand dollars is about the full value of the plant at present."

"Yes, that is my opinion," Bickerstaff coincided.

"But if we work the game in the right way I think we can get forty thousand for it," the superintendent explained.

"The idea of your holding onto ten thousand dollars' worth of the stock is only a bluff, you know, to make people think that you believe the mine is worth the money."

"In reality, you will get rid of your quarter interest, even if you have to take considerably less money than ten thousand dollars for it."

"Yes, I see; but then I will not have any business, and the sale of the mine will not give me money enough to live on," the old gentleman remarked.

"I know that, and I have taken that fact into my calculation," Caretta responded. "After paying me my share, and meeting the necessary expenses, you will have about twenty-five thousand dollars, and I will have about fifteen thousand more."

"Now, it is my idea for us to join forces and go down into Mexico, where there are always chances to pick up good mining properties at low figures."

"We will be able to get in on the ground floor, so to speak, and almost before we know it, our forty thousand will swell into a hundred thousand."

"Aha! that is a truly delightful prospect!" the old man exclaimed.

"You are willing to go in with me, then?" Caretta asked.

"Certainly, my dear fellow, I shall be delighted at the chance."

"Well, I honestly think that it will be a good thing for both of us," the superintendent said, in an honest way.

"Yes, yes, I am sure of it! And, my dear fellow, I must say—without any idea of flattering you, you understand—that when it comes to a business game of this kind you can give cards and spades to almost any man that I ever encountered."

"I am very glad indeed to learn that you have so good an opinion of me," Caretta declared, apparently very much delighted.

"And that reminds me, by the way, that there is a little matter I want to speak to you about."

"It concerns your daughter, Margaret."

"Ah, yes, you sly dog, you!" and the old man chuckled in huge glee.

"And you mustn't imagine that I have been blind, for I have fancied that there was a little affair going on between you two."

"You don't object?" the superintendent asked.

"Of course not! Object! Certainly not! I am perfectly willing and will do all in my power to aid your suit," Vanderbilt declared.

"Well, I am very much pleased to find that you are agreeable," Caretta remarked. "But I did not think that you would object to me as a son-in-law."

"Oh, no, you are a man after my own heart!" the old gentleman exclaimed.

"I am not so young as I once was, and in the course of time will be gathered to my fathers, as the old Biblical sharps say, and it would be a source of great satisfaction to me to know that my daughter had acquired a protector who would be able to take care of her."

"I flatter myself I can do that all right if the young lady is willing to trust herself in my care," the superintendent remarked.

"Oh, yes, she undoubtedly will. I can arrange that matter all right. All I have to do is to say the word, and the affair is settled."

Caretta expressed his thanks, then the three took a couple of drinks and Vanderbilt departed.

CHAPTER XXI.

CARETTA'S LITTLE GAME.

A few moments after Vanderbilt left the apartment the superintendent rose, went

to the door, which he carefully opened, and peered out.

By the bright moonlight he saw the old man taking his way with uncertain steps toward his own domicile, and when the mine-owner finally disappeared, he closed the door and resumed his seat.

For a moment the two men surveyed each other; then both burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, how did I work it, old man?" the superintendent inquired.

"To the queen's taste, you bet your life!" Bickerstaff replied.

"I thought I had got the old man so fixed that when I developed my idea I would not have much trouble in getting him to agree."

"Ah! the old man swallowed the bait, hook and all!" Bickerstaff exclaimed, with a chuckle of delight.

"Did you notice how his eyes glistened when you talked about getting forty thousand dollars for the mine?"

"Oh, yes; you can bet your life I watched him!" the superintendent averred; "but I wasn't anxious, for I felt sure our scheme would go through all right."

"I think you are right in getting out of this district," Bickerstaff advised.

"Not a doubt about it! Mexico will be a healthier location for me than this country."

At which confession Bickerstaff laughed.

"Yes; in the event of certain things happening, I fancy the United States might be a very unhealthy location for you."

"I am going to get out as soon as I can, and after I get the old man and his daughter down in Mexico I will marry the girl, and it will not take me long to get hold of what money the old donkey has."

"If he keeps on swilling whisky he will not trouble anybody for any great period of time. Everything certainly is going on famously; no danger to be apprehended, unless it comes from this confounded woman barber, or spy, or detective, whatever she may be. She is a wonderful woman, there is no mistake about that, and if she is what I suspect she will cause us a deal of trouble."

"Well, as soon as she shows the least sign of being dangerous, she must be crushed."

"That is the way to talk," Bickerstaff assented.

"There isn't any use of beating about the bush in a matter of this kind."

"All that I am waiting for is proof, you understand," the superintendent explained.

"But you have formed some impression in regard to the matter?"

"Oh, yes; and my opinion is that she will be sure to prove dangerous at some time," Caretta responded, with a lowering look on his dark face.

"You have an idea that she is coming the old game of waiting until she gets all her plans arranged before trying to spring a little surprise party on you?"

"Yes, that is my notion."

"But if you succeed in putting this little game through you will be down in old Mexico before she gets ready to proceed," Bickerstaff insinuated, with a chuckle.

"That is my calculation," the superintendent admitted; "and if she lynx doesn't move within ten days I will be out of her reach."

"But, it is getting late. Let us take a nightcap and turn in."

And the two rogues did so.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGER.

It was in the evening of the day which succeeded the one in which occurred the events related in our last chapter.

At eight o'clock a goodly number of people gathered in the barroom of old Fritz Hauser's American hotel.

The barroom was one of the principal lounging places of the men of the camp after the shades of night descended upon the town.

Here they heard the news of the day, and "swapped lies," to use the breezy Western saying.

Many of the notable men of the town

were in the saloon, and among the throng could be seen Pale Jack Delmaine, the Red Front Palace sport; Captain McIntyre and the three principal Red Gopher men, old Jonathan Vanderbilt, the superintendent, Fernando Caretta, and his satellite, the snaky John Bickerstaff.

Pale Jack was by the door chatting with the gallant captain, and the three Red Gopherites were leaning upon the little counter which stood in front of the desk railing off old Fritz's office, talking to the landlord.

The door of the saloon opened.

With the natural curiosity of men who hadn't anything in particular to occupy their thoughts, everybody in the apartment turned to see who was entering.

The party was a stranger—a young Mexican, apparently, judging by his dress and features—a well-built stripling of twenty or thereabouts, wearing the somewhat gaudy costume usually favored by the "cow punchers" of Old Mexico.

The young fellow had a dashing way with him and strode into the saloon with the air of a man who felt sure that he would be warmly greeted.

He marched up to where the landlord stood behind the counter, nodded his head and said, after the fashion of a prince:

"Landlord, I want one of the best rooms that you have got in the house for a week or two."

Then he pulled out a handful of gold and silver money, which he chinked merrily upon the counter.

If the Mexican expected to produce an impression upon the Bearopolis men by this announcement he was doomed to disappointment.

As a rule the men of the camp did not have a good opinion of cowboys, no matter what their nationality.

About a year before six "cow punchers," flushed with whisky, celebrating the close of a big "round up," attempted to show the men of Bearopolis that they were the biggest kind of "chiefs."

They galloped into the camp at full speed on their wiry little ponies, firing their revolvers in the air and yelling like a lot of Comanches.

The inhabitants of the town rushed into the street in hot haste, unable for the moment to guess what was the trouble, but as soon as they discovered that the row was caused by a lot of drunken cowboys, amazement gave way to indignation and disgust.

There were hot words, a drunken miner pulled his "gun," then followed a fight. Two citizens were killed and three of the cowboys were "plugged," while the rest had hard work to escape with their lives.

Ever since that time the men of Bearopolis had no use for cowboys, and, as a rule, the rough riders gave the town a wide berth, particularly when they were on a "tear" after a "round up."

So on this occasion, although every eye in the room was fastened on the young stranger for a few moments after he spoke, and the occupants of the saloon saw that he was not in liquor, and so judged there was not much likelihood of his attempting to kick up a disturbance, the men withdrew their attention, ignoring him as though he had been the commonest of "terderfoots."

"I can fit you off mit der wag of a mule's tail, mine friend!" the jolly old Dutchman declared.

"That is what I want. How much for the room?" the Mexican asked.

"If you want an extra good one it will cost you ten dollars fer der week," Fritz answered.

"That will do, and here is the half eagle for you," and the Mexican spun the gold piece on the counter with the air of a millionaire.

"All right; you are fixed! Do you want to go up to der room now?"

"Oh, no; I never am in my room until bed-time comes, and I have not made a practice of going to roost with the chickens."

Bickerstaff and Caretta were the only ones in the room paying any attention

now to the man, and they took it upon themselves to laugh loudly at the cowboy's remark.

"Well, you certainly don't look like that kind of a fellow!" the superintendent opined.

"Not by a jugful!" Bickerstaff assented.

"But I say, pard, it seems to me that your face is familiar to me, and I reckon that this isn't the first time we have met."

The Mexican took a good look at Bickerstaff; and then shook his head.

"I reckon you have got the best of me," the cowboy replied.

"How may I call your handle?" Bickerstaff asked.

"Jose Garcia."

"You from Old Mexico, I reckon?"

"Yes, from Nogalies. I have been on the Rey del Rey ranch," the Mexican explained. "But I have given up cow punching for good."

"You see, my old man, who has run a saloon at Nogalies for a dozen years or so, has taken his departure for the other world."

"Well, well; that is bad, and I condole with you," Caretta remarked.

"Bad? By Saint Peter, no! It was the best piece of luck that ever came to me!" the youth declared.

"How so?" Bickerstaff asked.

"I never got on with the old man, you understand; he and I did not agree, and as soon as I got big enough to look out for myself I ran away."

The others nodded and expressed by their looks that this was about the proper thing to do.

"I have not seen him for a couple of years, and had no expectation of profiting by my relationship, but, when the old man died a couple of months ago, I came in for all his property."

"He died so suddenly, you see, that he did not have time to disinherit me and give his money to the church, as he had always threatened to do."

"One thing is certain, and that is that you will be able to get a good deal more fun out of the cash than the church could do," Bickerstaff exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Oh, yes; there isn't any doubt about that!" the cowboy responded.

"Of course, after I got hold of this money I had no more use for the Rey del Rey ranch."

"Certainly not! no man punches cows for the fun of the thing," Caretta assumed.

"Well, I don't, anyway, no matter what anybody else does, for I am a gentleman born and I am not fond of hard work."

"The way I am situated now suits me exactly. I have a good amount of cash at my command, which I propose to invest in the first good speculation which turns up."

The landlord had been called away and none of the miners were paying any attention to the conversation, so the announcement of the Mexican's intention was only heard by the Red Gopher men.

This was a fortunate thing for the young stranger, for there were at least a dozen speculators in the room who would have made life miserable for the Mexican if they had known he had money to invest.

"This gentleman," and Bickerstaff nodded to Caretta, "will be glad to put you on to any good thing if we happen to hear of something worth going into."

"We are representative men of the town, you understand; this gentleman is a countryman of yours, Fernando Caretta by name, and he is the superintendent of one of the best mining properties in this district, the Red Gopher claim; I am his second in command, and my handle is John Bickerstaff."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," the young Mexican observed, with a low bow, and he shook hands with the pair in the formal manner peculiar to men of his race.

"I can assure you that you will find me a gentleman in every sense of the word. I am a man of spirit, too, and if there is

any fun going on, I am just the boy to take it in."

"Well, you will find this about as lively a camp as there is in the district," Bickerstaff assured. "And both my pard and myself know the ropes, you can bet your life!"

"Oh, yes, we will show you around," Caretta declared.

"He might take a set in with us in that little poker game which we were going to indulge in to-night," Bickerstaff suggested.

"Aha! yes, that is just the kind of fun that I like!" the young Mexican avowed, with sparkling eyes.

"Gambling is the sport of kings!" he continued. "There is nothing in this world like it. It stirs the blood and sets every nerve in a man's body to quivering!"

"Right you are!" Bickerstaff assented. "You have not made any mistake about the matter, and I can promise you a royal good time if you join us to-night."

"I shall be pleased to do so," the Mexican acquiesced. "What time does your game usually commence?"

"About nine o'clock," Bickerstaff answered.

"And that will give us time to take a trip around, and we will be able to give you a good idea of what the camp is like," Caretta remarked.

This struck the Mexican as being a good idea, and he said as much.

Then the three adjourned to the bar of the hotel, where they had a drink at the Mexican's expense, to cement their new-made friendship, as Garcia put it.

After leaving the hotel the three visited all the prominent resorts of the camp, winding up with the inspection of Paddy Kelly's Hole in the Wall.

At the back of Kelly's saloon was a private room, and it was here that the poker party met.

It was a small, but, as Bickerstaff asserted, an extremely select party.

There were only four beside the Mexican—Bickerstaff, Caretta, Paddy Kelly, and a dark-browed fellow, with a hang-dog look, who answered to the name of Mike Martin.

He was one of the Red Gopher miners, so that particular property was well represented in the poker coterie.

If the Red Gopher men thought they had picked up a flat when they encountered Jose Garcia, they changed their minds by the time the midnight hour had arrived, at which time the game ended.

The Mexican had demonstrated that he was an extremely good player, and really was a trifle ahead of the game when the play ended.

The party broke up with mutual protestations of good will, and it was arranged that the Mexican should come out and visit the Red Gopher mine on the coming day, Caretta having explained to him that it was proposed to bond the property.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE MEXICAN BITES.

The Red Gopher men were not particularly well satisfied with the result of the poker game, for they had confidently expected to get hold of a good slice of the young man's wealth.

Caretta and Bickerstaff occupied the same cabin, and on the following morning, when the two were eating their breakfast—they kept bachelors' hall together, after the fashion of the mining region—they discussed matters.

"The Mexican did not turn out to be the dead easy mark that I anticipated," Bickerstaff remarked.

"No; he held his own remarkably well. But all the Mexicans are natural born gamblers," Caretta responded.

"It comes as natural to a Greaser to gamble as for him to eat, and so it is no wonder that he came out ahead. He is a good player, held good cards, and seemed to be as well up to every point of the game as any card sharp."

"Oh, yes, the young fellow is no tenderfoot," Bickerstaff averred, "and I admit that I made a mistake about him."

"He had a rather loud way with him, and I jumped to the conclusion that he was a hot-headed young boaster who would be

inclined to throw his money away in the usual wild cowboy fashion."

"You did not take into consideration the fact that he was a Mexican," Caretta remarked. "All these descendants of dons have a grandiloquent way with them. When you go to a Mexican ranch the owner declares that his house and all its inmates are at your disposal, but he doesn't mean it. It is only his way of making you welcome."

"Yes, I understand; and that is where I made a mistake in sizing him up," Bickerstaff admitted.

"But, I say, do you think that his yarn about inheriting a good bit of property from his father is true?"

"Yes, I am inclined to think that it is," Caretta replied, after thinking over the matter for a moment. "You can see for yourself that the young fellow knows what he is about, and is no common cow-puncher."

"Oh, yes; that is plain enough."

"Of course, it is not possible for us to guess, with what we have been able to draw out of him, how much money he has got," Caretta observed.

"Very true. Some men would be apt to regard a thousand dollars as being a big fortune, while others would turn up their noses at anything short of forty or fifty thousand dollars."

"If his story is correct about his father having kept a saloon in Nagolies for years, and he came in for all the old man's savings, the chances are good that he is in possession of a good round sum of money," the superintendent argued.

"The Mexican saloon-keepers are generally a thrifty lot, and from the description which he gave of the old man I got the idea that he was even more of a miser than usual."

"Yes; he certainly said the father loved money so dearly that he hated to part with a cent except for the actual necessities of life."

"Then here is another fact: He has come up into this district to invest in a mining property, and you can't buy a mine unless you are prepared to invest a considerable sum—that is, such a plant as he said he wished to buy."

"Yes; and when you talked about bonding the Red Gopher for forty thousand dollars, he immediately remarked that he should think Vanderbilt would prefer to sell the property outright without going to the trouble of the bonding business, and when he said he would come up and examine the property to-day, that gave me the impression that he had an idea of investing in it, if it suited him. It would be a cash sale, of course, and if he hadn't got the money I don't believe he would trouble his head about the matter."

"It would help matters right out if the man could pony up the cash for the property," Bickerstaff asserted.

"Oh, yes, and a new idea has come to me," Caretta added. "I have been foolish enough to take a liking to the old man's daughter, and now the question comes up, would it not be a very unwise thing for me to bother my head about the girl at all, provided I could get the money without the woman?" the superintendent asked.

"Yes, in my opinion it would not be wise," Bickerstaff rejoined, immediately; "and I have thought so right from the beginning, too."

"You have?"

"Yes; but I did not say anything about it, for I am not the kind of man to interfere in matters which do not concern me, but my experience is that women, as a rule, do not bring luck to men who follow a life of adventure like ours."

"Well, I don't know but what you are right," Caretta acquiesced, reflectively.

"As I have always told you, I make it a rule to mind my own business, and your going after the girl had nothing to do with me, so I never opened my mouth to you about the matter either one way or the other; but now that the subject has come up, I don't mind saying to you that if you will be guided by my advice you will not permit yourself to become entangled with the woman."

"If you couldn't get the money any

other way, then there might be some sense in going after her, but it seems to me that the trick can be done without the girl being mixed up in it at all."

"We can arrange it all right," Caretta assumed; "but now comes yet another point: Can we arrange the game so that we need not bother ourselves with either the girl or the old man?"

"By jinks! it would be a big thing if we could fix the affair that way!" Bickerstaff declared. "The old cuss is a miserable old drunkard, and if we can get hold of the cash and get rid of him at the same time it would be a good idea."

"The whole thing turns on whether this Mexican has got thirty or forty thousand dollars cash or not, and is willing to invest it in the Red Gopher property," Caretta explained. "If he has the money and pays it over, it ought not to be a difficult matter for us to get our fingers on it, and then we can vamose for Old Mexico."

"That is the game," Bickerstaff asserted, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"With a pair of good horses we can easily bid defiance to pursuit, and after we get well out of this district, it will be almost an impossibility for any one to trace us," Caretta decided.

"Now you have got the thing right, and that is the game we ought to play for all it is worth."

"We will do it if the Mexican comes up with the cash."

"You are very wise to drop the girl," Bickerstaff repeated, "for, from what I heard in the town last night I think the chances are good you would find yourself mixed up in a first-class row just as soon as it was known in the camp that you wanted to marry her."

Caretta looked surprised.

"How is that?" he asked.

"It is this Captain Laff McIntyre who would make the mischief."

"Why, what has he got to do with the girl?"

"It seems that he has fallen desperately in love with her," Bickerstaff explained. "He happened to make her acquaintance at the hotel, and he has been out here three or four times to see her."

"Yes, I knew that he had visited Vanderbilt, but I hadn't any idea that Margaret was the attraction."

"She was the magnet which brought him, and I will tell you how I know it."

"If you remember, last night I left you and the Mexican in the hotel for a short while I went to Paddy Kelly's to arrange for the poker party. Well, the captain came in while I was there; he had been drinking pretty freely, and was rather inclined to be quarrelsome."

"Just after he made his appearance, one of the miners, thinking to have a joke on me, asked when Pale Jack and Margaret Vanderbilt were going to be married, saying that he had seen the pair sauntering in a loving way through the foothills."

"Do you think that is a fact?" asked Caretta, in considerable surprise.

"I reckon it is! Pale Jack is a great sportsman, and I have seen him with his gun in the neighborhood a half a dozen times lately," Bickerstaff admitted. "I didn't pay any particular attention to the matter, for I never saw him and the girl together, but now I begin to smell a rat, and I reckon that Margaret Vanderbilt was the game he was after."

"It is very likely."

"The captain flew into a violent rage the moment the remark was made."

"It was a blamed lie, he declared. Miss Vanderbilt was a lady, and it was ridiculous for any one to suppose that she would have anything to do with a common camp sport and card sharp like Pale Jack."

"That was strong language," Caretta observed, "and if the speech came to Pale Jack's knowledge there certainly would be trouble."

"Then the captain—being just drunk enough, you understand, to be careless of what he said—went on to explain that he thought a great deal of Miss Margaret himself, and wound up with the declaration that he reckoned if any man in the town married the girl, it would be a fellow about his size."

"Then there certainly is a chance for a

man to get into trouble by wooing Miss Margaret," Caretta had to confess, "and as far as I am concerned, they can count me out, and the captain and Pale Jack can fight it out between them."

By this time the pair had come to the end of the breakfast, and they departed to attend to their mining duties.

A little after ten o'clock the young Mexican appeared at the property.

Caretta introduced him to old Vanderbilt, and the two showed him over the property.

In anticipation of bonding the mine, the superintendent had fixed a set of books which gave a glowing account of the product of the mine and the value of the plant.

The Mexican made a very careful investigation, like a man who was determined to get at the truth of the matter, and he appeared to be well satisfied with the showing Caretta made.

He soon came right down to business.

If Mr. Vanderbilt would take thirty-five thousand dollars cash for the mine, a trade might be made.

The old man pretended to be indifferent. Forty thousand was the price which he thought he ought to get, but he would think the matter over.

This was agreeable to the Mexican; he wasn't in any hurry, and would wait until Mr. Vanderbilt made up his decision about the matter, but the sum he named was the most he would give for the property.

Then he took his departure.

The Red Gopher men chuckled gleefully after the Mexican was gone.

"He bites!" Bickerstaff declared.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it," Caretta acceded.

"I suppose it will be wise to take the thirty-five thousand?" Vanderbilt asked, anxiously. "Or, do you think that by holding off we can get more out of him?"

Caretta and his satellite shook their heads.

"No, I reckon we have got his best offer," was the superintendent's opinion.

"It is a good big prize, too, and with the money we can get a big layout in Old Mexico, where we can all make a fortune."

It was a pleasant prospect.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GARCIA EXPLAINS MATTERS.

When the young Mexican arrived at the camp after his visit to the Red Gopher property he dropped into Pale Jack's saloon.

The proprietor and his bartender were the only people in the place.

Pale Jack greeted Garcia like an old acquaintance, and the pair withdrew to the gambler's private room in the rear.

"Did you discover anything?" the sport asked.

"Yes; this Caretta is my man surely enough. He is no Mexican."

"Well, he never seemed to me as if he belonged to that race."

"And he is the biggest kind of a rascal, too. In fact, the whole place is a den of thieves."

"The old man is a helpless drunkard and is completely in the power of these two scoundrels, who are working in together."

Then he explained how they proposed to sell the mine.

"But it isn't worth ten thousand dollars at the outside," Pale Jack insisted; "that is, unless it is a deal richer than anybody in the town believes."

"I know that they have been doing a deal of blowing, but that is a common thing, and if a man is getting a hundred a week out of his claim he is pretty sure to declare that it is panning out at the rate of a thousand."

"Yes, I understand all about that," the Mexican assured. "They have a nice set of books which go to show that the mine is paying about ten per cent. on a valuation of thirty odd thousand dollars."

"It is an easy matter to fix a thing of that kind. Figures are quickly made."

"Then I reckon they have got the mine nicely salted, for they are willing for me to send experts and to base the price on their reports."

"The most of the mining experts in this district are a lot of unmitigated liars and frauds, and will not hesitate to make any kind of a report, provided they are paid enough for it," Pale Jack declared.

"I know one of the fellows who assayed a piece of a grindstone and made it pan out at the rate of two hundred dollars to the ton."

"I took it all in, of course, for it was my game to allow them to think I was a tenderfoot who could be easily stuck. What I was after was to spot my man, and I succeeded in doing it, too," the Mexican remarked, with a laugh.

"I suppose the next move in the game will be to nail him?"

"No; I will have to wait for a while until I hear from the coast. My orders were to spot my man, send on word, and then wait for orders."

"That seems to be a rather queer arrangement," Pale Jack observed, in surprise.

"Yes, it is. In fact, the whole business is a queer one. I am working in the dark, but as I am well paid for it I don't suppose I ought to complain."

"I don't know what the man has done, but from what little insight I have got into the matter I am inclined to think he is wanted on a serious charge."

"Anyhow, the fellow is a rascal of the deepest dye, and it is my impression that he would not hesitate to commit any crime—even murder—provided he stood a chance of escape."

"A nice sort of a husband he would make for the old man's daughter," Pale Jack observed, with a frown.

"He is just the kind of a man to help himself to all the cash he could get—his fingers on and skip away some night," the Mexican assumed. "It is my idea about this sale of the mine that he has engineered the thing so as to get a chance to levant with the money."

"Yes, marry the girl, then steal all the money and run away, leaving her and the old man to starve," Pale Jack supplemented, with bitter accent.

"You are just the man to put a stop to a game of that kind," the Mexican asserted.

"Yes, and you can bet your life that I will, too, as soon as possible!" Pale Jack assured.

"I am going to see her this afternoon, and I shall not hesitate to explain matters."

"You understand how the affair stands. We haven't really done much of any love-making; I held back, for, as she was an Eastern girl, I didn't know but what she might have a prejudice against me on account of the kind of life I lead."

"But during our last conversation I took pains to explain fully all about myself, and as she did not seem to think the life I was leading was anything out of the way out here, I have an idea that it will not be any objection."

"When a man and woman have the right kind of feeling for each other they don't usually need many words to come to an understanding," the Mexican avowed, with the air of one who knew all about the matter.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the barkeeper, who poked his head into the room and announced that Skinny Jake Thompson, the stage driver, wanted to speak to him.

"Send him in!" Pale Jack ordered.

The stage driver soon made his appearance.

"How ar' ye?" he saluted, ducking his head to the sport, and then he cast a suspicious glance at the Mexican.

"I was thinking of having a little private chin with you," he informed the sport.

"That is all right; you can go ahead. This is a friend of mine upon whom I can depend," and Pale Jack then introduced the two.

"I allers had a mighty good opinion of you, Jack, you know," the stage driver began. "You have always run the squardest kind of a game, and to my thinking there is not a whiter man in this hyer camp."

"I am much obliged to you for your good opinion," the sport replied, with a bow. "And I don't hesitate to assert that no man ever got anything but a square deal in my place. I wouldn't rob him myself nor would I allow anybody else to do it."

"There is a big percentage in favor of the bank, and if a man can rob with such odds on his side, then he ought to be shut up as a scamp."

"That is it! That is as true as Gospel!" and Skinny Thompson brought his sinewy hand down upon his knee in such a vigorous manner that it sounded almost as loud as a pistol shot.

"Now, then, I ain't the kind of man to see any galoot go for to walk on a clean white man like yourself!"

The others looked surprised by this announcement and looked at the stage driver inquiringly.

"Oh, I mean it! I mean jest what I say, and you kin bet your life on it, too!" the driver asseverated.

"Has anybody in the town got the notion of walking on me?" Pale Jack asked.

"Oh, yes; that is the say-so that I am giving out!"

"I haven't heard anything about the matter. Who is the party?" the sport questioned.

"This hyer gay buck of a captain!" Skinny Thompson said, with a snort of derision.

"You don't mean Captain McIntyre?"

"You bet your sweet life I do!" the driver responded.

"He is the man who is everlasting going to wipe up the earth with you."

The sport was amazed.

"I don't understand it, for I have never had any trouble with the man."

"He has got it in for you, sure enough!" Thompson responded.

"He was a shooting off his mouth in Kelly's saloon last night, and he made no bones of saying that if you didn't keep from interfering with him he would soon put you where the dogs would never be able to bite you."

"The man must be out of his senses, for I have never come in contact with him at all!" Pale Jack declared.

"It is all on account of this sweet-scented rosebud, Margaret Vanderbilt!" Skinny Thompson explained.

The sport looked both surprised and annoyed.

"What the deuce has she got to do with it?" Pale Jack wanted to know.

"Why, the captain is stuck on her!" the driver answered.

"Is that so?" and the sport evidently was surprised. "I was not aware that he was acquainted with the lady."

"Well, he is, and he has got the idee into his noddle that she is jest the finest dame thar' is on top of this hyer foot-stool!"

"She certainly is an attractive girl; there is no doubt about that."

"The captain, you understand, is a mighty audacious, rough-riding cuss," Skinny Thompson thought; "thar' isn't a man in this hyer deestric w'ot has got a better opinion of himself, and when he makes up his mind that he ought to do a certain thing he is mighty apt to believe that nobody has got any right to interfere with him."

"Some loud-mouthed galoot happened to see you and this hyer gal together, and blurted out afore the captain."

"I never made any secret about being acquainted with the lady," Pale Jack admitted, evidently much annoyed.

"The sojer-man was up on his ear at once, and he made no bones of saying that if you came sneaking around the gal he would be obliged to eat you without salt."

The Mexican laughed, while the sport's face grew paler than usual, and a fierce, bright glitter came to his eyes.

"I hope, Jack, that the captain will be kind enough to give you timely notice when he proposes to begin that little operation," Garcia observed.

"Wa-al, I told the gang that I reckoned the captain ought to have the politeness to send you a postal card just as

soon as he got good and ready," Skinny protested, with a grin.

"Oh, yes, he will undoubtedly," was Pale Jack's sarcastic inference.

"I must admit that I am completely astonished," the sport added; "for Captain McIntyre was about the last man in the town with whom I might expect to have trouble."

"The durned military galoot has got a bee in his bonnet, and that is jest what is the matter with him!" the driver asserted; "too much crooking of the elbow, too much bug juice, and when he runs six or eight drinks into him he kinder gets the notion into his head that he runs the whole durned camp."

"Yes, there is no doubt that the captain is a hard drinker, and when he gets more liquor on board than is good for him he is apt to be extremely disagreeable," Pale Jack had to admit.

"I reckon that you will have to give him a lesson, Jack," Skinny opined. "It has always been my opinion, you know, that the captain ain't half so big a chief as he cracks himself up to be."

"He is one of the kind of galoots who goes a good deal on brag and blow; an' if you will take the trouble to figure him up you will see that he never has cleaned out anybody who amounts to anything since he came into this neighborhood."

"He has been in quarrels enough, but some way he has always been able to kinder scare his men; he being a captain with a lot of sojers, a good many folks were rather afeered to buck ag'in' him."

"If he runs up against me he will find that I don't give a continental for him or for his position. An officer is no better than anybody else, and he will find that I will not yield an inch to him because he wears a uniform," Pale Jack declared.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE WAR-PATH.

"Jack, I will go my bottom dollar on you every time, if you have a ghost of a show!" Thompson asserted, solemnly.

The sport thanked the driver for his good opinion, and then the three returned to the saloon, where Pale Jack stood treat.

The sport and the Mexican took ale, but Skinny downed a generous dose of whisky, declaring, with a grin, that he never changed his p'izen, for fear of astonishing his stomach.

That done, the three strolled up the street toward the hotel.

As they passed the shop of the female barber the driver noted that the place was closed.

"W'ot's the matter? Has the she shaver busted?" he asked.

"Oh, no; she is doing a regular land office business, I understand," the sport informed. "She has shut up shop for a few days while she pays a visit to Silver City to lay in a stock of razors and other necessary articles."

"I don't wonder that she used up her stock of razors in short order, considering the crop of beards that she has operated upon since she opened up in this camp," the stage driver had to admit. "A mowing machine would be a durned sight more suitable than a razor for the beards of a heap sight of the men in this district."

By this time the three were within a few feet of the hotel, when they halted to exchange the time of day with a couple of miners from the upper gulches.

At that moment from the hotel came Captain McIntyre and a particular friend of his, who delighted in playing the toady to the officer.

This was one of the shopkeepers of the camp, Maurice Cohan by name, a young man who was not particularly well liked by the men of the camp.

In the first place, although he was undoubtedly a Jew, yet he always denied it.

Then he set up to be a high roller and a sport, after business hours, but as he bore the reputation of driving a harder bargain with his customers than any other tradesman in the camp, the miners were rather inclined to give him the cold

shoulder when the hours of relaxation set in.

With Captain McIntyre he got along first rate, for he played the flunky to perfection and followed the officer around like a lapdog.

Both men had been drinking and were talking in a boisterous manner as they came out of the hotel.

"Yes, sir; you can bet your life that I am going to put a stop to the thing, and that right away, too!" the captain asseverated. "All I regret is that I didn't hear about the matter sooner so I could have taken action, but there is an old saying that it is better late than never."

"Oh, yes; you can kick him out of the way soon enough now," his companion assured.

"And I will do it, too! You can bet all you have got in the world on that!"

The two had advanced toward the three who had paused on the street, but being so occupied in their conversation the officer had not noticed the Pale Jack party until his threat or boast had been uttered.

Then, as the captain, and his friend came to a sudden halt, and cast an angry glance upon the others, everybody in the neighborhood who happened to notice the party immediately realized that there was a prospect of a row.

Pale Jack and his friends hadn't a doubt that the captain and his satellite were referring to him, and so he was all ready to take the bull by the horns.

Captain McIntyre glared at the sport for a moment; then, drawing himself up in a haughty way, spoke out loudly:

"I reckon you are the man whom I want to see!"

"Well, I don't know whether that is true or not, but if it is true, you will never have a better chance to see me," the sport quietly responded, "than this very moment and on this particular occasion."

"I suppose you know who I am?" the captain asked, in an arrogant way.

"I think I have met you before, although I will have to admit that I don't know much of anything about you," Pale Jack retorted, with keen sarcasm.

"I am an officer and a gentleman, and I reckon there isn't a man in this camp who can lay over me!"

"What is the object of this announcement?" the sport asked, coldly. "What do you suppose I care about that?"

"If a man gets in my way you can bet your life I am going to make it warm for him!" and the captain shook his finger in a threatening way at the sport.

"Do you mean that for me?" the gambler demanded, an ugly light shining in the clear eyes.

"Yes, I mean it for you!" was responded, hotly and arrogantly. "It has lately come to my knowledge that you have gone out of your way to scrape an acquaintance with a certain lady, and I tell you right here and now that the thing has got to stop."

"How long is it since you set up to be master of this camp and assumed the right to tell men what they should do?" Pale Jack wished to know.

"I am not trying to boss the camp, but I am going to boss this one particular matter, though!" the officer responded, with a deal of dignity.

"Why, man, I should think that you would have better sense than endeavor to force yourself upon the society of a lady who is as far above you as the sun is above the earth!" McIntyre waved his hand oratorically.

"I have not been trying to force my society upon anybody; and I am not willing to admit that there is anybody in this town, man or woman, who is any better than I am!" Pale Jack rejoined, with severe emphasis.

By this time the altercation had attracted a regular crowd, who were listening eagerly. That there could be but one end to the discussion every one of the bystanders believed, for while the captain bore the reputation of being overbearing and quarrelsome, Pale Jack was known to be a man of courage, and no

one thought it likely he would allow the other to back him down.

"Great Heavens! Why, man, you must be crazy to make such an assertion as that!" asserted the captain—you, a common card sharp, a professional sport, who makes a living out of a low-down gambling den!"

All the bystanders were immediately on the alert when they heard this contemptuous language, for, knowing the gambler as they did, they anticipated that Pale Jack would at once go on the war-path.

The sport's pale face became almost colorless, and the light which came from his eyes was almost like a flame.

With an effort he restrained his anger, though, for it was his invariable rule before going into a quarrel to make the bystanders comprehend that he had right on his side.

"You are using extraordinary and unwarrantable language, and I suppose you understand that you will be called upon to back up your words?" the sport suggested, with almost terrible deliberation.

"That is just the kind of a man I am!" the captain answered, arrogantly; "I back up what I say, here and elsewhere, always."

"That is good, for when a man goes into an affair of this kind he ought to be prepared to stand the consequences."

"I am! You can bet your sweet life on that!" the officer retorted, venomously.

"Now, then, as you have gone to the trouble of telling the community what kind of a man I am—and really it was not necessary, you know, for I have lived in this camp some time, and I reckon there are not many people in the town who do not know all about me—I think it will only be the fair thing for me to tell the citizens what I think about you."

McIntyre was completely taken by surprise by this retort.

"What you think about me?" he exclaimed, growing red in the face, evidently furiously angry.

"Yes, that is what I said," the sport replied.

"What do you suppose I care for your opinion?" the captain demanded, contemptuously.

"And I might answer that by asking you what you thought I cared for your opinion of me," Pale Jack returned.

"You have stated the truth when you said I was a sport, and ran a gambling place for a living; I am not ashamed of it, either, for I reckon I run as creditable a place of the kind as can be found in all the West, excepting none!"

"My game is always a perfectly square one, and any man who ventures his dollars in my place can depend upon getting a good run for his money and a fair deal every time!"

"Ah, yes, that is what every man who runs a sporting crib declares!" was retorted, with a contemptuous flip of the finger.

"And though I do get a living by running a gambling house, with the necessary saloon attachment, yet there isn't an honest man in the town who will say anything against me or my place. With all such men my character stands A No. 1! But, how do you stand?"

"How do I stand?" the officer iterated, in complete surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," was responded. "You hold a commission in the United States Army, and are supposed to be an officer and a gentleman. You may be an officer, but you are certainly not a gentleman, for you are a disgrace to the uniform you wear, being a quarrelsome, loud-mouthed braggart, usually under the influence of liquor and always ready to indulge in a brawl like a common camp bum. That is just how you stand in this community."

As McIntyre listened to this speech, which was delivered with the utmost coolness and without a trace of passion, his anger mounted to a white heat.

His "aspersed honor" clamored for revenge; he became eager for blood.

But, by a strange accident, the irate man did not have a weapon. Usually he

carried a brace of revolvers, but by a stupid oversight he had laid aside his belt when he ate his breakfast, at the hotel, and had neglected to get the weapons from the landlord after the meal was ended.

"You miserable, low-down gambler, I would make you eat your words right on the spot if it wasn't for the fact that I am not armed!" the captain vociferated.

"I am not seeking to take any advantage of you, or any other man!" Pale Jack asserted. "I am armed, but I can quickly fix you all right so that you shall be on an equal footing."

Then Pale Jack drew a pair of revolvers and handed them to Skinny Thompson.

"Now we are on even terms," the sport continued, "and it is my determination to call upon you, Captain McIntyre, to step up to the captain's office and settle."

"What do you mean?" the officer demanded.

"I am going to have satisfaction for the offensive language which you have used about me!" Pale Jack returned, in a tone which betrayed his almost venomous intent. "You are a miserable scallawag, half full of whisky two-thirds of the time, and I don't think that you are fit to associate with decent men at all—a disgrace to the service and a poltroon!"

There was a grin on the faces of the majority of the bystanders as they listened to the citation of the captain's accomplishments.

Captain McIntyre was not a popular person in the camp—very far from it; so the sentiment of the townsmen was decidedly in favor of the plucky sport.

The rage of the military man was unbounded.

To be thus openly denounced was humiliating and galling, and so McIntyre was quite ready to kill the bold speaker on the spot.

"Why, you miserable hound of a gambler!" the captain yelled. "Do you dare to openly insult me in presence of a crowd of witnesses?"

"I not only dare to tell you just what I think about you, but I am prepared to give you as good a thrashing as a man ever got, that is, if you have the courage to stand up and take your medicine like a man."

"Do you dare to insinuate that I haven't the courage to meet you?" the captain shouted, beginning to unbutton his coat.

"Yes, I will admit that I do not give you credit for having much courage unless you have all the advantages on your side," was the sport's rejoinder.

By this time the captain had his coat unbuttoned and proceeded to strip it off.

"I will soon show you whether I have the courage to face a low-lived, miserable ruffian like yourself!" the man of gilt buttons fairly howled.

"Peel off your coat and give me a chance to wipe the earth up with you!" and as he spoke the captain threw his coat to Cohan and proceeded to roll up his sleeves.

"I'm your man, and the quicker you begin the operation the more I will enjoy it!" Pale Jack assumed, with a sardonic grin.

And as he spoke he removed his coat and gave it to Skinny Thompson to hold.

The stage driver was overjoyed at the prospect.

"Oho! Sail right in with your mule teams! This hyer is the sort of picnic in which my soul delights! Whoop!"

"Yes, sir-ee, you kin bet your boots on that and you will capture the outfit, every time. It is the camp of Bearopolis against the United States Army, and I am willing to bet two dollars and a half that the regular army won't have a button left when the thing ends!"

There was a general snicker from the crowd at this speech, for nine out of every ten of the bystanders heartily wished that the boastful army man would come out at the "little end of the horn."

Cohan felt called upon to say something for his friend.

"Ah, bosh!" he cried. "When the captain gets through with Pale Jack his best friend will not be able to recognize him."

"Oh, ho! It is there you are, Mister Counterjumper? Well, I will go you a five-dollar note that the captain gets licked right off the reel!" the stage driver called out in a business-like way, holding up a five-dollar bill and waving it in the air as he spoke.

"Hyers the good old solid stuff which talks!" Skinny added; "so shell out your money, Cohan! Put up or shet up!"

The shopkeeper hesitated, whereupon the crowd grinned, and a number of them made remarks, more or less unpleasant in their tenor—under which circumstances Cohan was goaded into putting up his five dollars against the stage driver's money.

The crowd did not have to wait long for the contest, for soon the two faced each other.

"How are ye going to run it—Marquis of Queensberry, or good old-fashioned rough and tumble?"

"The Marquis of Queensberry rules will suit me," the captain asserted.

He prided himself upon being something of a sport and athlete, and in his younger days had done considerable boxing, but he did not take into consideration the fact that he was now a man of forty-five, inclined to flesh, and in no such condition as his opponent, for Jack was not yet thirty, and without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his sinewy frame.

To the experienced eyes of the old sports in the crowd—men who knew what fighting was, and capable of coming to a correct judgment—it looked as if it would be a safe thing for a man to bet five to one on Pale Jack.

As soon as the combatants were ready, Skinny Thompson observed that a time-keeper and a man to act as master of ceremonies were necessary, and suggested two well-known citizens for the positions.

Both men were willing to serve, provided the fighters were agreeable.

Neither had any objections to make.

The referee announced the rules.

"Three-minute rounds; one minute rest between rounds; no wrestling nor throwing to be permitted, and if the fighters come to a clinch they must break away immediately as soon as called upon by the referee."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SHORT AND SHARP.

The antagonists bowed in token that they comprehended the conditions.

"Now, then, if you are all ready, I will sing out time, and you kin shake hands and wade in," the master of ceremonies observed.

The referee was one of the best known men in the town, Big Ben Smith, the Express agent. Smith was a giant, standing over six feet in his stockings, broad-shouldered in proportion, with a lion-like head, ornamented by long iron-gray locks and a flowing beard of the same hue.

"No shake hands!" cried the captain, with a contemptuous sneer. "I don't mind lowering myself far enough to pound him within an inch of his life, but I wouldn't shake hands with the scoundrel!"

"I have an objection also to shaking hands with a man of this kind," Pale Jack observed.

"I will hammer him as I would hammer any scallawag who got in my way, but I prefer to draw the line at shaking hands," which prompt retort caused the bystanders to grin.

Further discussion was cut short by the referee's hoarse voice crying out "time!"

And the moment the word was spoken the captain rushed at his enemy like a tiger.

The taunts of Pale Jack had so exasperated him that he was almost beside himself with rage.

He had formed the plan of "rushing" his antagonist and "knocking him out" in short order.

The sharp-eyed sport met him in the most sportsman-like manner.

There was a fierce exchange of blows, all of which were skillfully parried or

dodged; then Jack purposely left an opening for the captain to get in a "right-hand swing," and McIntyre improved the opportunity immediately, doing his best to get in a stroke sufficiently wicked to disable his opponent.

But his alert opponent dexterously dodged the blow, and then, before the other could recover himself, the sport got in a full-force left-hander on the chest just over the heart.

It was a wicked stroke, and McIntyre collapsed under it like a jack-knife. Down he went, all in a heap, grunting with the racking pain.

The extra fat which the captain carried was already beginning to get in its work.

There was a scene of wild excitement when McIntyre fell.

"He's knocked out! Hurrah for Pale Jack!" yelled a few enthusiastic admirers of the gamester.

"No, no!" yelled a dozen more men, who were posted on the rules. "He's got ten seconds. If he comes to the scratch within ten seconds he is all right."

The time-keeper, Billy Jones, the genial and urbane tumbler-juggler of Fritz Hauser's American Hotel, lost his head completely. He had his watch in his hand—he was chosen to the office because he was supposed to have the best watch in the town—but instead of counting the time, he was gazing vacantly at the prostrate captain.

The referee kept his wits about him, though.

"Count the time, Billy!" Big Ben Smith yelled. "If he don't toe the scratch in ten seconds he is out!"

And the crowd took up the cry: "Count, Billy! What good are you, anyway? Count, old man, and earn your money!"

And there wasn't a man in the crowd who possessed a watch, good or otherwise, who didn't pull it out and proceed to assist the genial Billy.

Recalled to a sense of what was right and proper, Billy announced the seconds in a loud voice.

Thanks to the blunder, though, the captain got about six more seconds than he was justly entitled to.

"Eight—nine," counted Billy Smith, and as the word nine came from his lips the captain got on his feet.

He was a badly demoralized man, though, for the one terrific blow had about used him up.

At a glance Pale Jack saw that the captain was in "Queer street," to use the old expression, and he went right at him, determined to bring the affair to a speedy end.

McIntyre, realizing that he was in difficulties, attempted to keep out of his opponent's way, but only to discover that the sport would not be denied. A far better boxer, also a stronger and quicker man, Jack succeeded in getting in a right-hander on the jaw which knocked the captain back fully a yard; then, quick to follow up the advantage, feinting with his right, he caused the bewildered captain to uncover his body.

Instantly shot the terrible left, and again McIntyre went down in a complete state of collapse.

This time two-thirds of the crowd were on the alert to see that Billy Jones did not neglect his duties as time-keeper.

"Now, then, Billy, look alive!" yelled one miner.

"Get a move on you, Billy!" cried another.

"Keep your eyes on your turnip!" suggested a third.

"Commence to count right off the reel!" exclaimed Skinny Thompson.

"I want you to understand that I have got five good solid dollars on this hyer fight, and I don't propose to have any monkey business about the matter. Go on with your count now! The man is entitled to ten seconds, and I am clean ag'in' giving him ten minutes!"

The stage driver was a popular man in the camp; then, too, as the sympathy of the crowd was also with Jack, the men were eager to instruct the genial tumbler-juggler of the American Hotel in regard to his duties.

"Brace yourself up, Billy! No monkey business! Count, Billy, count!" yelled the bystanders.

But Billy Jones was a shrewd fellow, and as he had been caught napping in the first place, he did not intend to give the crowd a second chance to find fault with him.

"Ah, will you hold your row and stop yawping like a lot of jackasses!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "I reckon I know my little biz as well as any man in the gang!"

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven," the time-keeper counted, while every man in the crowd hung with breathless eagerness upon his calls.

And every man who had a watch, good or bad, repeated the count.

"Eight—and the three minutes are up! The round ends!" Jones announced, to the complete surprise of the majority of the listeners, who had forgotten that the rounds must end in three minutes.

Cohan and a friend of his who had volunteered to act as seconds to the captain, hastened to do what they could for their man, whom they soon got upon his feet.

Chairs had been provided for the fighters, also sponges, water, and liquid refreshments.

The combatants seated themselves in the chairs, while the seconds did their best to refresh them.

Pale Jack was breathing a little harder than usual, but this was the only sign that he had been engaged in a contest.

The captain, though, was in a bad way, and his two seconds worked like beavers to bring him around so as to send him to the scratch in a good condition.

One minute was scant time, although, thanks to the exchange of words between the bystanders and the time-keeper, the captain got nearer two minutes' respite than one.

"I'm too infernal fat!" he confided to his seconds. "In fact, I am better fitted for a hog-killing than a footrace, and the pokes that that miserable scoundrel gave me in the bread-basket have taken the wind out of me."

"Keep away from him until you get your second wind," Cohan counseled, "and if he tries to force matters, clinch with him all you can. The referee will yell 'Break! break!' of course, but you can take your time about it."

"I reckon that is the only chance for me," the captain assented, in a hopeless way.

"I was a fool to get mixed up in this fight, anyway," he added. "I did not take into consideration that it is a good ten years since I did anything of the kind, and it is only natural that I should be a little rusty. But I'll make a good try for it!" and McIntyre shook his head as if determined to do his best. "If I can succeed in getting in one or two good licks I may succeed in laying the fellow out yet."

"Oh, yes, the thing ain't ended. You stand a good chance to win," Cohan insisted, doing his best to encourage his principal, although in his heart he would not have been willing to bet a cent to a dollar on the captain, and felt satisfied that his five dollars were "gone up."

Few words passed between Pale Jack and his seconds.

"You have got him," the Mexican observed. "He is completely winded, and you ought to be able to finish him in short order."

"Oh, yes, it's a thousand dollars to a broken-down mule on you now," Skinny Thompson decided.

"Time!" Billy Jones exclaimed.

Again the boxers faced each other. Pale Jack knew that he had his man beaten, and so he went in to end the affair as soon as possible.

The captain attempted to carry out the plan which he had formed, but was neither skillful nor quick enough to keep out of his opponent's way.

Pale Jack banged him right and left in the most unmerciful manner, and when McIntyre attempted to escape punishment by clinching, the sport coolly pushed him away, and then got in a right-hander on

the point of the jaw which sent the captain sprawling on his back.

Then there was a row.

The miners commenced to yell "Count, Billy—count!" as usual, and Jones, getting "mad" all through, told them to hush their yowling, or he would throw up the job.

The excitement was intense.

It was the general opinion that this time it was a knock out, sure enough, for the captain had gone down like a log.

Billy Jones counted in a loud voice, and when he came to nine, every eye in the throng was fixed on the prostrate man.

The captain showed no sign that he comprehended that he was being rapidly counted out.

"Nine—ten!" counted Billy Jones.

A great shout went up from the crowd.

Pale Jack had knocked Captain McIntyre out, and, as one enthusiastic miner declared, "in as pretty a fight as a man could wish to see, short and sweet, and altogether a beauty."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CAPTAIN'S PLAN.

As soon as the decision was given, Cohan and his friend hastened to the assistance of the captain.

McIntyre was apparently so badly used up that it was considered wise to remove him to the hotel and summon a doctor.

This action gave rise to a report that he had been mortally injured, in fact, rumors were soon in circulation that McIntyre had died from the results of his injuries.

But the doughty army man was "playing possum." When he woke to the consciousness that he was a thoroughly beaten man, which he did after he got the terrific blow on the jaw that prostrated him, as he lay on the ground he came to the conclusion that he had got enough.

He could have struggled to his feet when the ten seconds elapsed, but he knew that if he did it would only be to expose himself to renewed punishment, and, knowing that he could not win, he thought he might as well give up first as last.

As the captain could have lasted but a few seconds more in the ring, this action on his part was wise, though he certainly didn't want the crowd to understand that he could have come up to the scratch, but refrained for the purpose of escaping punishment.

When the doctor arrived he found that the captain had recovered consciousness, and as the medical man was a blunt, outspoken fellow, he made light of the affair.

"You will be all right in a day or two," he declared. "But I am astonished that a man like yourself should attempt to stack up against a sport like Pale Jack. You might have known that he was away up at the top of the heap as a fighting man. These sports couldn't run their places if they were not competent to handle all kinds of men."

Then the doctor departed.

The captain was extremely sore both in body and mind. He had been stripped and put to bed, and all sorts of soothing liniments applied to his bruises by the faithful Cohan.

"I was an infernal ass to be drawn into this encounter," McIntyre growled. "If it had not been for the miserable piece of stupidity on my part of leaving my belt in the hotel, I would have been all right," he added.

"If it had come to guns I would speedily have made an end of the rascal."

"That isn't so sure, captain, it seems to me," Cohan demurred. "Pale Jack has been in a few shooting scrapes since he came to the camp, and has succeeded in getting the best of his man every time."

"Yes, but I am mighty quick on the draw, and I would have worked the thing so as to get the drop on him," the captain urged.

"Mebbe you would. But I tell you, captain, from what I have seen of Pale Jack, I reckon that the man who gets the drop on that sport will have to get up mighty early in the morning." And Cohan spoke in a tone which showed that he was deeply impressed with the conviction that what he said was the truth.

"I would have stood a deuced better

chance than I did by going in on this boxing business," the captain growled.

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt that."

"I have got a lesson, but you can bet your life that I will get square with the fellow in the long run."

"You are going to try him on again?" Cohan asked, and from the way he spoke it was evident that if the storekeeper had been in McIntyre's place the odds were big that he would have given Pale Jack a wide berth in the future.

"Try him again?" the captain repeated, in a perfect fury. "Why, man, this earth is not big enough to hold this rascal and myself after what has happened."

"Oh, I can understand that it is natural for you to want revenge."

"Revenge!" the captain echoed. "I shall never know a moment's peace until I have the heart's blood of the scoundrel!"

Cohan saw that the captain was bent upon having satisfaction, and though he was rather of the opinion that the farther McIntyre proceeded in the business the worse he would fare, yet as he knew that to suggest such a thing would render the other furiously angry, the storekeeper was wise enough to hold his peace.

"The whole trouble with this matter was that I rushed into it blindly," the captain explained.

"I had made up my mind to call the fellow down, but never took the trouble to calculate about the best way of doing the trick."

"Yes, you certainly did rush into it bull-headed!" Cohan assented.

"You can bet your life that I will not make that mistake again. It was one of those rash things that a man will do sometimes. In fact, I made the mistake of holding the man altogether too cheaply," McIntyre admitted, with a decidedly bad grace.

"But I know all about the man now, and shall take measures accordingly. In my company I have got about a half a dozen of the biggest blackguards out of jail. In fact, all of the six spend fully two-thirds of their time in the guardhouse. I can easily arrange with these rascals to secure their aid against this card-sharp bully."

"That is a capital idea," Cohan declared, immediately perceiving that the captain intended to "double-bank" Pale Jack, to use the slang term.

"It will not be apt to excite any suspicion for my rascals to loaf around the town, for it is a common thing for six or eight of them to be in the camp at the same time; but, of course, you understand I shall not proceed to work this trick right away," the officer explained.

"No, it wouldn't be wise; you must give time for the affair to blow over."

"I have thought over a plan of action," the captain went on. "I shall give out that I made the biggest kind of a donkey of myself in going into this quarrel—shall lay the whole blame on whisky, you know—if I hadn't been drinking freely I never would have allowed myself to be drawn into the matter—take the high moral ground, you understand, that a man like myself ought to be ashamed to become mixed up in a quarrel with a low-down sport."

"I see," Cohan inferred. "You are going to work the trick so as to throw Pale Jack off his guard—lead him to believe that you don't intend to trouble him again; then, in a couple of weeks, come into camp some night with the six men, contrive to run up against the sport and lay him out for good and all?"

"That game ought to work," Cohan asserted, and so it was arranged.

The army representative was to add to his dishonored defeat a new dishonor.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VANDERBILT IS STRICKEN.

It was the captain's game to make everybody believe that he was much more injured than he really was, so he sent over to the fort for an ambulance.

This go-easy arrived after supper and lugged the defeated champion off to his own quarters.

In a conversation with the landlord and some of the citizens, who, not having

witnessed the fight, were anxious to see just how badly used up the officer was, and so came in to see him, McIntyre went ahead on the lines determined upon.

Too much whisky was to blame for the untimely affair, the captain confessed, and he was heartily ashamed of the part which he had played.

Which admission was, of course, duly reported to Pale Jack, and whereat he smiled sardonically; the man was not to blame; it was the whisky in him.

When Jack was alone with his two friends, however, the young Mexican and Skinny Thompson, he adverted to the matter.

"It may be possible that the captain has got all he wants, and that I will not have any more trouble with him, but to my mind all this is sheerest subterfuge. The man is obstinate, dogmatic and vicious, and as he is not deficient in courage, the chances are a hundred to one that he will never be satisfied until he has made another attempt to get square with me."

His companions agreed with this opinion, and concluded that their friend would be unwise not to keep his eyes open for a new attack on the captain's part, with such aids as his mercenaries might be expected to contribute.

"There are some mighty hard cases over at the fort," Skinny remarked, "and it would be jest like that gold-buttons galoot to ring them in for any kind of dirty service."

"Yes, and if this army potentate, with five or six of his bullies, made an attack on me, I would have to hustle mighty lively, undoubtedly," Pale Jack inferred, smilingly. "It would be pistols and gore—not under the Queensberry rules."

"You must keep your eyes open and be keener not to give the sodgers a chance at you," Skinny Thompson advised.

"Oh, you need not be alarmed about that. The army will not get a chance to surround me if I know myself, and I think I do," the sport assured. "When they catch me off guard it will be after I have been salted with lead."

"Just you count me in on your side, sport. I'll keep heeled, now, you bet!" the stage driver volunteered.

"And likewise yours to command," added the Mexican.

The days passed until a week had elapsed after the street encounter. The much-battered captain had kept himself to the fort, and the townsmen imagined that he was rather disinclined to come to the camp after his ignominious discomfiture, but the soldiers of the garrison were in town about as much as usual.

Pale Jack was on the alert and soon noticed that there were half a dozen of the boys in blue who displayed a decided partiality for his saloon.

This struck the watchful sport as being suspicious.

The soldiers had never been in the habit of patronizing his place to any extent before that; the place was not of the sort for such fellows; Paddy Kelly's and kindred dives were much more to their tastes and coarse drinking habits.

He confided his suspicions to Skinny Thompson and the young Mexican.

"It looks to me as if the fellows were getting in the habit of loafing in my place so as to accustom me to their presence," he said; "for if I am used to seeing a half a dozen of them in the saloon every now and then, I will not be apt to think there is anything odd about the matter when all come in for a row."

Pale Jack, having spotted the soldiers, got Skinny Thompson to make a quiet investigation in regard to each of them—as they always seemed to be the same squad.

So he was not surprised when the stage driver reported that the fellows were all men of bad character, the worst set in the garrison, and about half the time in the guard house for their misdeeds.

"Just as I suspected," the sport acknowledged, "and that makes it the more evident what their game is."

"The captain has made up his mind to go in for a hog killing just as soon as he

gets everything good and ready. He calculates to give me a little surprise party; but, sometimes, such picnics don't turn out according to the programme of the man who gets them up."

During this week the Red Gopher people had been daily expected to sell the mining property to young Garcia.

Caretta had told him that he was ready to have an expert report on the value of the mine and plant at any time.

Garcia replied that he had sent to his bankers in regard to his money, and as soon as he heard from them he would be prepared to decide definitely just what he should do.

But, as time passed and the young Mexican manifested no intention of closing the bargain, or of having the expert examination and report, the Red Gopher people began to grow anxious.

"What do you think of this thing, anyway?" Caretta asked of Bickerstaff. "Does the man really mean business or has he been wasting our time? And if so, what is his game?"

"Well, it is a hard matter to decide," replied the other. "I certainly thought he was going to come to the scratch all right, but I must admit that I am becoming dubious about the matter—and suspicious, too."

"It must be borne in mind, I suppose, in our calculations, that these Mexicans are always slow in business matters; they do not go ahead and push things through as does the average American business man."

"There isn't any particular hurry about the matter, of course," Bickerstaff consoled. "The mine will not run away."

"Ah, yes; but I am anxious to vamoose, you know," Caretta confessed, with a serious mien. "I have got the impression that the longer I stay in this town the more unhealthy it will become for me."

"Really, now, don't you think you are putting that a little too strongly?" Bickerstaff asked. "It doesn't seem to me that any particular danger threatens you now, or is likely to, as far as I can see. I admit that I was a little apprehensive about this Lawrence woman, but she has apparently jumped the town for good. Her shop is yet closed."

"She has gone to Silver City to get supplies," Caretta explained.

"Yes, that is the yarn given out, I know, but she has been gone over a week, now, and she surely would not take all that time to get a few razors and mugs. That is a blind, or I miss my guess."

"It doesn't seem likely it would take a whole week."

"And then I met a fellow right from Silver City this morning; a man right in our own line of business, and up to snuff from the word go. I asked him if he had seen the woman and he hadn't. She had not been in Silver City at all!"

"That is odd!"

"Decidedly! for if the woman was in Silver City or had been there you can bet ten to one this sharp would be sure to know it, and know, too, just what she was there for. He is that kind of a man."

"Well, I don't know exactly what to make of it," Caretta admitted, slowly and thoughtfully.

"It may be the departure of the female barber signifies that I need not be apprehensive of any danger from her; but then, again, the fact that she has so mysteriously disappeared may mean that she is hatching some scheme—laying some trap to ensnare me."

"That is not impossible!" Bickerstaff had to assent; she is a mighty mysterious customer—that is my view of her."

"Anyhow, I have got the idea that the quicker I get out of this camp the better, and you can bet all you are worth that I shall not allow the grass to grow under my feet as soon as I can make the proper arrangements to depart."

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it, I should certainly vamoose as soon as possible."

It was the noon hour; the two men had eaten their dinners, and were now taking a smoke in front of their cabin before going to work.

Suddenly their attention was attracted by a fiendish yell coming from Vanderbilt's house.

"Hello! what does that mean?" Caretta exclaimed, as he and Bickerstaff jumped to their feet.

Another yell followed the first; then old Vanderbilt came rushing out of the house and acting as though he had suddenly gone mad, for he danced up and down, going through the motions of pulling something from around his neck, throwing it to the ground and stamping upon it.

A moment the two watched the peculiar motions of the old mine owner; then the truth flashed upon them.

"He is fighting snakes! A bad case of the jimjams!" Caretta asserted, confidently.

"Yes, he has got a redhot case of the man-with-the-poker; and I don't wonder at it, for the way he has been pouring down whisky lately has been perfectly awful," Bickerstaff averred.

The two hurried to the assistance of their employer, and a fearful time they had with him, for in truth it was an awful attack of delirium tremens.

At last they got the old fellow into the house again, but were compelled to tie him in his bed.

A messenger was despatched for a doctor.

In due time the medical man arrived.

He shook his head and looked grave as soon as he saw the patient.

"This is an exceptional case," he declared, "and I have serious doubts as to whether I will be able to pull the man through, but I will do the best I can."

The doctor's judgment was correct.

Although it was the first attack of the kind Vanderbilt had ever had, yet it proved a fatal one.

He lingered for about ten hours in fearful agony, and then expired.

Margaret was left unprotected, but, acting on the impulse of the moment, she sought Pale Jack in the camp, early in the morning.

The sport was amazed, but it did not take him long to decide what was the proper course for him to pursue.

He took Margaret to Mrs. Hauser, at the hotel, and explained what had occurred.

"Miss Vanderbilt and myself will be married in a couple of months, and I want you to take the best of care of her until the ceremony takes place," the sport advised.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PROMPT MOVEMENT.

As soon as the excitement attending the death of old Vanderbilt was over, the pair of conspirators, Caretta and Bickerstaff, fell to speculating as to whether they could turn the affair to their individual advantage or not.

It did not take them long to come to the conclusion that the death of the old man would be a benefit to them.

"Margaret knows absolutely nothing about business," Caretta remarked. "And as she is a gentle, trusting creature, it stands to reason that we will be able to persuade her to entrust the entire control of the property to us."

"I reckon you have hit that off about right," Bickerstaff assented, delightedly.

"If we play our cards rightly, we will undoubtedly be able to gobble the whole thing," Caretta opined, with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea for us to make a formal call upon her this afternoon, say about four o'clock, for the purpose of assuring her that we will look after her with a brotherly interest?" Bickerstaff asked, with a grin.

"Yes, we will do the consolation act up brown," was Caretta's assurance.

The two chuckled a great deal over the "easy game," as they termed it, which had come to them.

In the latter part of the afternoon they went to see Margaret, and were surprised to find that she was not at home.

The girl had hurried away, apparently

taking particular care not to allow any one about the place to see her depart.

"I don't exactly understand the meaning of this," Caretta protested.

"She has probably gone off for a little walk in the solitude of the woods, where she will have a chance to weep without exciting attention, as she meditates over the calamity which has befallen her. Women are fond of doing that sort of thing," Bickerstaff observed, with a sarcastic grin.

"Yes; women are deuced odd creatures, and it strikes me sometimes that the less a man has to do with them the better he is off," and Caretta seemed to speak from some experience he may have had.

"I reckon there is a heap of truth in that," the other acquiesced.

The pair had come out of the house during this conversation, and were now proceeding slowly in the direction of their own cabin.

They were going in the direction of the trail which led to the mining camp, and so when the sport, Pale Jack, and Skinny Thompson, came around the bend in the road they were seen immediately by the pair.

"The sport has heard the news, and has hurried up to condole with the girl," Caretta assumed, with a sarcastic smile.

"He will have to go and chase her through the woods," Bickerstaff supplemented, with one of his ugly grins.

The pair halted to receive the newcomers.

"This is a bad piece of business," Pale Jack remarked, as he and Thompson came up to the two.

"Yes, very bad indeed, and, coming so unexpectedly, too," and Caretta appeared to feel badly enough over the whole affair.

"Wal, boys, it is what we have all got to come to," Skinny Thompson philosophically declared. "Death and taxes are bound to hit us in this world, every time."

"It is the course of nature, and although death is never a welcome guest, we must grin and bear it," Pale Jack suggested.

"That is so," Caretta assented; "grin and bear it."

"Got to stand it whether we like it or not, so we might as well put the best face on this matter," Bickerstaff intimated.

"Of course it is a hard matter to make women look at the thing in a reasonable way, but Miss Margaret is a sensible girl and is bearing up mighty well under the circumstances," Caretta explained.

"I agree with you in regard to that. She certainly is acting sensibly over the unexpected event," Pale Jack averred.

The Red Gopher men looked surprised at this, for it was a mystery to them how the speaker could possibly know anything about how Miss Margaret was bearing herself.

"And now we will come right down to business," the sport added, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Business!" repeated Caretta, while Bickerstaff stared questioningly.

"Yes. You are in charge of this Red Gopher property?" Pale Jack asked, of Caretta.

"Certainly; I am the superintendent," Caretta answered.

"You are the man who wants to look at this little legal document, then," and Pale Jack, drawing a paper from his pocket as he spoke, unfolded it.

"A legal document!" cried Caretta, betraying extreme surprise.

"Yes; a power of attorney, giving me authority to act for Miss Margaret Vanderbilt in all business matters."

"If you will cast your eyes over the document you will see that it is all right and regular."

Caretta examined the paper, and saw that it was as the sport said, entirely right and regular.

"But I don't understand this," the superintendent demurred.

"It is easily explained. Miss Vanderbilt and myself are going to be married in due time," Pale Jack informed the now doubly astonished man.

"This sad calamity will cause us to wait a while, but in the mean time I judge that

it is my duty to look after my future wife's property."

Never in all their lives had the plotters been more taken off guard than were the two by Pale Jack's unexpected announcement.

They looked at each other, and then stared at the sport and at the legal document which he had submitted for their inspection.

"Really, this is something altogether unexpected," Caretta finally spoke, not knowing what else to say.

"Under the circumstances, it is the proper thing to be done," the sport assured. "Miss Vanderbilt is a young lady who has never been used to transacting business, and it would not be possible for her to attend to the affairs of the mine in a proper manner, so she has delegated me to act for her, and this power of attorney settles the thing for the present, at least."

"But I don't really see any necessity for the getting out of the paper," Caretta dissented, with a lowering brow. "I have had charge of the property ever since Mr. Vanderbilt bought it, and, in fact, it was upon my recommendation that he made the purchase. A mighty good one it was, too, as any one in the camp who knows the particulars of the affair can tell you."

Caretta neglected to state that the man who sold the mine to Vanderbilt gave the sharp five hundred dollars for the part which he took in selling the mine.

It was, in Western parlance, a "skin game" all the way through, for, in truth, the mine, at that moment, was regarded as played out, and the stranger was to be robbed.

The striking of a new ore vein after Vanderbilt got possession, was one of those special acts of sheer dumb luck which sometimes happens, even in mining life.

"Oh, this is only going ahead in a strictly business way," Pale Jack asserted.

"While Mr. Vanderbilt was alive, he attended to his interests, of course. Now that he is dead, Miss Vanderbilt can't look after the business, and so it is a necessity for her to have a representative. As her prospective husband, I am the proper person to take charge of the whole concern, of course."

"I don't mean to do it in person, you understand, for I don't set up to be a mining sharp," the sport informed, not placatingly, certainly, for he added:

"As it happens, though, just the man for the position is in the camp, and open for a job."

"You may know the party; it is old Bill Parker, who used to run the Golden Wedding claim over on Duck Creek."

"Yes, I know the man," Caretta admitted, in a sulky way.

"Well, he is right up to the mark, eh?" the sport asked.

"Yes; he knows his business," the superintendent had to admit.

"But, I say, let me understand this matter!" Caretta exclaimed, abruptly.

"Certainly. What is there about it that you don't understand?" Pale Jack asked, in the politest manner possible.

"I don't see any need of old Bill Parker, or anybody else, for that matter, interfering in the affairs of the mine."

"You seem to be rather dull of comprehension," the sport replied, a little impatiently. "Don't you understand that he takes Mr. Vanderbilt's place?"

"But, old Vanderbilt was only a sort of a figurehead, anyway; he never did any real work or bossing, or overseeing. He left all that to me," the superintendent urged, excitedly.

"Very true. The old man did not have the ability, but you will find that old Bill Parker will earn his money from the work go," Pale Jack declared.

"But he isn't needed!" Caretta still protested, in an ugly mood.

"Pardon me, but that is a thing for me to decide, and not for you," and the sport spoke as one in authority. "As I think that he is needed, in he goes!"

And as he made the announcement he looked the superintendent right in the eyes, almost defiantly.

Caretta could no longer restrain his anger.

"Say, Mr. Delmaine, I reckon you don't

know the state in which the affairs of the Red Gopher mine are in!" he objected.

"Well, I don't know as I am particularly posted about the mine, but it will not take me a great while to learn all the facts," the sport assumed, in his cool, quiet way, which at times was so aggravating.

"Just so; then don't you forget that I own a clear one-half of the Red Gopher property," and Caretta now assumed a defiant air.

"I will have to admit that this is news to me," Pale Jack replied.

"It is the truth, as this gentleman can bear witness," indicating Bickerstaff.

"Oh, yes; that is a dead sure fact; there is no mistake about that," the satellite substantiated.

"If it is the truth, I don't see how it alters the situation any," the sport assumed. "Miss Vanderbilt certainly owns the other half, and is entitled to a representative to look after her interests."

"Well, I won't have it!" Caretta exclaimed, doggedly. "That is all there is about it. I'll manage the property just as I always have done."

"Excuse me, you will do nothing of the kind; you hav'n't got any say about the matter," the sport asserted, firmly.

"We will see about that," retorted Caretta, venomously.

"Are you anxious for trouble?" asked Jack.

"Yes, I am. I am right on the fight, if you will have it so."

"I will have to give it to you, then, so be on your guard!" and with this warning the sport and Skinny Thompson departed.

CHAPTER XXX.

A SURPRISE.

The conspirators were very much disgusted by this unexpected action on the part of Pale Jack, and after the sport's departure they fell to canvassing the strait they were in.

"We are not going to have so easy a snap as I anticipated," Caretta admitted, with a gloomy brow.

"That is true," Bickerstaff assented.

"We are in for a fight, and no mistake!"

"And from what I know of the sport I imagine he will give us a good fight," the superintendent decided.

"Yes; there isn't much doubt about Pale Jack being a warrior from way-back; but, we have got one important advantage—the possession of the mine."

"Yes; I know the old gag—possession is nine points of the law; but the law is mighty slow in this region," and Caretta, with a chuckle, expressed his view of the law in that emergency.

"I shall go right to work to fight the thing all I know how," he added.

"Of course! That is the game, every time!"

"I will engage the best lawyers that money can hire, and as I am well provided with funds, you can bet your life I will give this Pale Jack the fight of his life."

"It will be a week or two before he can do anything," Bickerstaff suggested.

"Oh, yes; this law business always takes time. This move to-day was only a case of a big bluff," the superintendent asserted, confidently. "He had an idea that if he came up here with his power of attorney, and put on a bold front, we might be scared into giving up possession of the mine and stepping right aside like two discharged hired men."

"Ah, yes; but we are too old birds to be caught by such chaff," Bickerstaff encouraged. "The little game didn't work."

"Not much it didn't work! And I can tell this sport that before he gets hold of the Red Gopher property he will have to spend some money and do some taller work than punching an army captain's head!"

That evening after supper the two visited the camp, eager, of course, to learn if Pale Jack had done any talking about what his intentions were in regard to the mine.

Vanderbilt's sudden and awful death gave the townsmen a deal to talk about, and wherever the two went they found it to be the principal topic of conversation.

The announcement, too, that Pale Jack was to marry the orphan girl, as soon as a

reasonable time had transpired, also gave the miners food for much speculation.

Not a word, though, did the two hear about the power of attorney business.

"It was evidently a genuine case of bluff," Caretta concluded. "He rushed the paper out and went for us, but, as we called him down promptly, he has come to the conclusion to haul in his horns until his lawyers can get their fine work in—which gives us plenty of time to put in our fine work, too."

"It certainly looks that way, and I reckon you have got the whip in your hand yet."

"Just so; and I'll drive the Red Gopher coach for all it is worth, you bet!"

The two remained in the camp until about eleven o'clock, and then took their way to the mine, feeling very well satisfied with the outlook.

But the conspirators greatly underrated the cool and resolute sport.

Pale Jack had not been for ten years in the mining region without being up to all the games which desperate men play upon each other when struggling for the control of valuable mining property.

He had no idea of waiting for the slow process of the law to give him possession of the Red Gopher mine—not he! He knew a game far ahead of any which depended upon law and lawyers.

The Red Gopher people usually rose about six in the morning, and on the day which followed the one on which occurred the events just described, when the miners made their appearance from their cabins a decided surprise awaited them.

Pale Jack, with a half a dozen men, armed to the teeth, each and every man carrying a Winchester rifle in addition to the usual brace of revolvers common to all men in the mountain region, were roosting on some rocks at the entrance into the valley in which the mine was located.

The miners rubbed their eyes as though they were in doubt that they saw aright; then they stared aghast.

This warlike demonstration on the part of the sport was ample evidence that he meant business. He would not wait for the slow process of the law to give him possession of the Red Gopher property, but had come with an armed posse with the intention of jumping the claim.

The news was soon carried to Caretta, and, accompanied by Bickerstaff, he made his appearance in a hurry.

"We are in for it," Bickerstaff declared. "The cuss means business from the word go!"

"What is to be done?" Caretta wondered, in his dismay.

"We are not in any condition to stand a siege."

"Oh, no; it must be a fight in the open, for the nature of the ground prevents any other kind."

The forces were evenly balanced.

There were seven on the Red Gopher side, and seven in the attacking party; but Pale Jack's men had a decided advantage as far as weapons were concerned.

Then, too, the miners employed in the Red Gopher works took no interest in the quarrel. Caretta was not popular with them, and they did not feel inclined to risk their lives on his account—not they!

Pale Jack drew out his handkerchief and waved it in the air as a flag of truce.

Caretta responded promptly, and then the two advanced to meet each other.

"What is the meaning of this hostile demonstration?" the superintendent demanded, irately, when he came up to the sport.

"I have come to take possession of the property."

"By force?"

"Yes, by force; as you compel such a course."

"But this is clearly an illegal proceeding!"

"Oh, no; the illegal business is on your side."

"How do you make that out?"

"You are in possession of a property to which you have no claim."

"Oh, yes, I have!" Caretta retorted, hotly. "I own a clear half of it."

"Have you got the papers to back up that statement?" Pale Jack demanded.

"Yes, of course," Caretta replied, putting on a bold front.

"All right; produce them! And if you can show that you have a good claim to half the mine, you will find that I will be willing to do the square thing; that is my style."

"What kind of papers did you expect?" Caretta demanded, feeling that he was in a tight place.

"There can be only one to give you a shadow of a claim to the mine, and that is a transfer from Vanderbilt."

"Well, I will admit that I haven't got the transfer," Caretta confessed, doggedly. "The old man died before the paper could be executed. But I have notes of his showing that, at the time of his death, he owed me over ten thousand dollars."

"Which is the money he lost to you at poker?"

"It is no business of any one how I got possession of the notes," Caretta asseverated, angrily.

"That is possibly true. But the fact that he owed you the money don't give you the right to seize the Red Gopher property and hold on to it," Pale Jack announced. "The law don't allow you to do anything of that sort, you know."

"That is clean outside the limit. You see, it would be making you judge, jury, United States marshal, and everything else. Oh, no, a game of that kind can't be worked."

"At present you are in illegal possession of the property, and I propose to shake you out of it."

"But your movement is just as illegal as mine," Caretta protested.

"Not by a blamed sight!" was the prompt retort. "We represent Miss Margaret Vanderbilt, the only child of the dead owner of the property, and there isn't a doubt that she is the sole heir to everything that Jonathan Vanderbilt left."

"All that you represent is a claim against the dead man, and whether that claim is good or not can only be determined by a legal examination or proceeding to collect a claim against his estate."

"But, I say, you know, we are only wasting time in discussing this matter!" Pale Jack exclaimed, abruptly. "I am here with an armed force to take possession of this property, and I calculate to do it. Now, then, the question is, what do you propose to do about the matter?"

"Will you come out with your men and settle the matter with a good, square fight?"

Caretta and Bickerstaff looked at each other; then they cast a glance at the Red Gopher men as though anxious to see what they thought about the matter, but no warlike signs were visible on a single countenance; not a man had a desire to risk his life in this quarrel, which did not concern them at all.

The single glance satisfied the conspirators that they could not depend upon a man to give battle.

"Maybe, as these gentlemen are not interested in this matter, they may not care to go into a war," Pale Jack suggested.

The sport comprehended that.

"But, as I pride myself upon always giving a square deal to everybody I run up against, I am willing to give you a show for your money. So I will meet you in single fight, man to man, and let the possession of the mine depend upon the issue."

Everybody looked interested, and all stared inquiringly at the superintendent.

But Caretta did not have the courage to meet a foeman like the sport.

"No; I will yield possession under protest, and look to the law to right the wrong!" Caretta declared, with a great deal of dignity.

Thus, by this prompt action, Pale Jack wrested the Red Gopher property from the hands of the conspirators.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TRADE.

After being ejected from the mine Caretta and Bickerstaff took up their quarters at the saloon of Paddy Kelly.

Kelly did not pretend to run a hotel, but he had a couple of rooms where he

accommodated friends who desired only to remain for a short time.

The two were extremely downcast over the failure of their carefully planned scheme.

Paddy Kelly sympathized with them, and the three, over some bottles of beer, seated at a table in a corner of the saloon, discussed the situation.

"It is hard lines, boys!" the saloon-keeper declared. "And you were working the game so beautifully, too! Upon my word I didn't think there was a doubt about your collaring a big lot of money."

"Matters have certainly gone very badly," Caretta admitted. "It did look as if I had a dead sure thing."

"Well, you will get the ten thousand, I reckon," Bickerstaff observed. "And if you do, I think you can safely say that you have played a mighty good game."

"Oh, yes, to pull in ten thousand ducats in one haul is a big winning!" Paddy Kelly asserted.

"Well, I don't think I have any reason to complain," Caretta assented.

"But there is one thing about the business that I don't like, and that is being obliged to wait," he added.

"I am not given to superstition, but the idea has taken possession of me that the quicker I get out of this town the better it will be for me, and so, under the circumstances, I don't like being obliged to wait."

"I never say anything against a man's presentiments," Bickerstaff observed, in a thoughtful way, "for I have seen too many cases where there was a good deal in the thing, and if you feel that it would be healthier for you out of this district than in it, then I should do the best I could to work the get-out trick."

"I say, boys, I have an idea which may be worth something," Paddy Kelly put in, as if a new thought had come to him.

The others gazed attentively at the Irishman, for, as he was a particularly sharp and shrewd fellow, it was likely his idea would be good for something.

"Fire away, Paddy!" Caretta commanded.

"Ten thousand dollars is a large sum, and all you have got to show for it is the old man's notes, so that if you wanted to sell the claim the chances are big that you would have a deal of difficulty in getting anybody willing to invest, even at a good big discount."

The others nodded assent, for there was no doubt of the truth of that assumption.

"The only man in the camp who would be apt to invest in the documents is Pale Jack himself."

Caretta and Bickerstaff looked at each other for a moment, and then promptly nodded assent.

"You are right for a hundred ducats!" Bickerstaff exclaimed.

"If you are willing to make a discount he might take up the notes."

Caretta reflected over the matter for a moment and then he said:

"I would be glad to make a trade with him, even if I had to take five thousand for the ten, for I am so deuced anxious to get out of this town that I am willing to make a big sacrifice."

"Oh, you ought to do better than one-half!" Paddy Kelly insisted; "that would be a fearful discount, you know."

"I am willing to stand it, if I can arrange so as to close the matter right up," Caretta replied.

"Suppose we fix the thing in this way," said Paddy Kelly. "I am on excellent terms with Pale Jack. He is a man who I considered would be a dangerous enemy, and so I have really gone out of my way to stand on a friendly footing with him."

"Now, I will go over to his place and explain that you want me to invest in these notes, and I thought it was wise to come and see him about the matter, thinking there might be a chance for us to go in and make a good thing out of the game."

"That is a good idea," Caretta assented. "I should not be surprised if you succeeded in making a good trade."

"It is the very game to play!" Bickerstaff declared.

"Pale Jack is a keen, long-headed fellow, and in my opinion the chances are a hundred to one that you can make a deal with him."

"I will go right over," and Paddy arose as he spoke, "for there's nothing like striking when the iron is hot!" and the saloon-keeper took his departure.

It was only three minutes' walk from Paddy Kelly's Hole in the Wall to Pale Jack's Red Front Palace, so the Irishman was soon in the presence of the sport.

He explained that he wanted to see Pale Jack in regard to a little business matter and the sport conducted his visitor into the poker room at the back of the saloon.

"You know, Jack, that I am a speculator from the beginning," Paddy began, "and when I see a chance to make a trade I always go for it, red hot!"

"Well, a man has got to keep on the hustle nowadays in order to make any money."

"By the way, that jumping of the Red Gopher claim was a mighty good piece of work!" Kelly complimented.

"Yes, the game went through all right, and under the circumstances it was the only way the trick could be done."

"It is in regard to the Red Gopher business that I have come to see you about."

Pale Jack nodded.

"These two men, Caretta and Bickerstaff, have been accustomed to making a headquarters of my place," Paddy explained; "not that they are any particular friends of mine, but they have always been ready to give up good money for what they wanted," he hastened to add, "and, of course, a man in my line of business is always glad to see customers of that kind."

"Oh, yes; in such a town as this."

"And now that the pair are out of business they have arranged to stop with me until they strike something."

Jack nodded, but there was no particular manifestation of interest on his calm countenance.

"They are thinking of going away, and so Caretta is anxious to settle up this claim that he has against old Vanderbilt."

"He spoke to me about the matter and I told him right out and out that you were the only man in the camp who could afford to make a deal with him."

"I reckon that is about right."

"He made me an offer to take charge of the matter and that is what brings me to see you."

"Yes, I see."

"Caretta wants to light out and he will sell his claim at a big discount; so, as I know that you are a business man, Jack, I come right to the point."

"Yes, I comprehend. Now, Kelly, as I have always found you to be a pretty square sort of a fellow, I will not beat about the bush with you," the sport promptly took up the matter.

"In my opinion, this claim that Caretta makes that old Vanderbilt owed him ten thousand dollars is monstrous."

"But he has got the old man's notes and they seem to be all right and regular," Paddy Kelly urged.

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt that he has the documents, but they were obtained by fraud!" Pale Jack declared; "sheer, rank fraud, Kelly."

"For the last couple of months Vanderbilt has really not been in his right mind, as everybody well understood, and everybody also knows Caretta and Bickerstaff are a couple of sharpers, and they went in to skin the old man of every dollar that he was worth."

"You see, I don't hesitate to speak plainly, for I know it is the truth, and what is more I can prove it, too, if the statement is questioned."

"Jack, I ain't saying that they were not up to working a game, for from what I know of the pair, I reckon they would not hesitate to try a trick of that kind if they thought they could make a good stake out of it."

"Oh, they are a couple of red hot sharpers—there is no doubt about that; and they played a dead easy game with the fuddle-headed old man. They kept him filled with whisky and then at night regularly had a little poker game, and, of course, the old victim was skinned from the word go!"

"Now, all that being true, I don't mean to let this thing go through! I am going to fight the claim—not because the money was won at gambling, for I will not play a baby act of that kind, but because the old man was literally robbed of the cash when he was stupefied with liquor."

"Caretta will have to come into court and show that he fairly won the money, and I reckon he will have a mighty difficult job to do anything of the kind!" Pale Jack declared, with firm determination.

Paddy Kelly looked disgusted.

"Why, I say, Jack, if the thing is worked in that way it will take months to settle the matter!"

"Yes, that may be so; but let it take months or years, it will be all the same to me."

"Wouldn't it be better to settle the matter by a compromise?" Paddy Kelly now cautiously urged; "give the man a chance to make something out of the deal? Caretta will sign over the notes for five thousand dollars, and that is a mighty big discount."

"No, I wouldn't give that sum."

"Three thousand! Give the man a chance for his life!" Paddy Kelly pressed. "He is in a bad hole now, and has got to have some money to make a fresh start, since you have bounced him, you know."

Pale Jack meditated for a moment.

Kelly had used an argument which appealed to him; he had set Caretta adrift without warning; ought he not to do something for the man?

"I will give two thousand dollars and that is the best I will do," the sport finally announced.

Kelly at once accepted the offer and it was arranged that the trade should be closed on the following morning.

Caretta's desire to get out forced him to consent, although much against his will.

His ten thousand dollar plum had dwindled into a poor persimmon.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ATTACK.

It was early in the evening of the same day when the events just narrated transpired.

Pale Jack had finished his supper at the hotel and, with the Mexican, Garcia, stood just outside the building enjoying a cigar.

Garcia had just come in on the stage from Silver City and the sport explained to him what had occurred in the camp during his absence.

"You are to pay the money over to Caretta to-morrow?" the Mexican queried.

"Yes, that is the arrangement."

"And as soon as he gets the cash he will undoubtedly vamoose the ranch, you think?"

"Not a doubt about it."

"Well, I am sorry to say that I can not do anything to stop him, for I have not yet received the proper authority."

"That is what I have been waiting at Silver City for, using the telegraph to bring matters to a focus."

"I wired the people in the East that I had located the man, and could make the arrest just as soon as the proper legal documents arrived. They replied, all right, the matter would be attended to by a special messenger, and for me to remain in the camp here until the messenger arrives."

"You cannot do anything, of course, until the messenger does put in an appearance, and if the man jumps the town before the papers come into your possession you cannot do anything; is that the condition?"

"Yes! Not a thing," Garcia replied.

"And if the man gives me the slip all I can do will be to hunt him down again."

"And if he makes a trip into Old Mexico, as the chances are a hundred to one he will do, you will be apt to have a lively chase of it."

"It cannot be helped," the Mexican replied, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"The people in the East have acted in a mighty funny way about this case from the beginning, and I fancy there is some mystery about the matter."

At this moment a soldier came lounging up the street, and when he saw Pale Jack he headed directly toward him.

This particular soldier is no stranger to the reader, for he is the man who accepted the bribe from the captured road-agent, thereby enabling that rascal to make his escape.

Pale Jack recognized the man and, of course, had an extremely poor opinion of him; besides, he knew him to be a regular bum, who was drunk two-thirds of the time.

"How do you find yourself this evening, Jack?" the soldier asked, as he came up to the two.

"All right; nothing to complain of," the sport replied.

"You are a good man, Jack—as good as man as there is in this town, but for all that, things may not always go in your way," the soldier remarked, in a somewhat mysterious manner.

The sport noticed that the man had been drinking, and so was not much disposed to pay any particular attention to his words.

"Oh, yes; a man cannot always call the turn," the sport answered, carelessly.

"But you are too good a man to be double-banked," the blue jacket went on, dropping his voice almost to a whisper.

"Yes, that wouldn't be pleasant," Pale Jack admitted.

"Yes, I can generally be depended upon to do what is right," the sport responded, beginning to get an idea that the communication might amount to something.

"This is too public a place to talk, for if the thing don't go through, and the party found out that I was chinning with you, he would be apt to suspect that I gave the snap away."

"We might walk around the back of the hotel to the corral," the other suggested. "No one will be apt to see us there."

This suited the soldier, and so the three proceeded to the hotel corral, where they were amply sheltered from observation.

"Now, how much is there going to be in this for me?" the soldier wanted to know.

"That depends entirely upon the nature of the information, and I have got to know something about the matter before I can make a trade. I am not buying cats in bags just now, you understand."

"It ought to be worth a sawbuck, I think," the soldier insisted. "Ten would be cheap!"

"Go ahead with what you have to say and I can soon tell you; but, one thing you can be sure of, and that is I will give you all the thing is worth."

"Captain McIntyre is at the bottom of the job."

"The captain is not satisfied, then, with what he got?" Pale Jack hinted.

"No, sir! And he is going in to do you up this time, for sure."

And then the soldier went on to reveal how it was the captain's intention to get a half dozen of his men in Pale Jack's place, kick up a row with the proprietor, and clean out the saloon.

"A nice little game, but it may not work as well as the captain imagines," the sport intimated.

"When is this picnic to take place?"

"To-night."

"This is a sure enough thing?" the sport asked, suspiciously. "You are not trying to ring in any ghost story or fake on me?"

"Oh, no! I am giving it to you as straight as a pike staff," the soldier protested. "You see, sport, I am posted,

for I am one of the men who is to do you up," and the fellow could but grin at the idea.

"But I am a keen sort of a chap, you understand, and as I happen to be very short of cash just now, I thought I could make a raise out of you by giving the snap away, and so doing you a good turn."

"I don't care two cents for the captain, you understand, sport; he is just a tyrant and a selfish hound, and wouldn't turn his hand over to help me in any way."

"Mebbe you ain't satisfied yet that I am giving the thing to you straight?" the soldier questioned. "But I reckon I can prove it to you, so you won't doubt."

"The soldiers ain't been much in the habit of hanging around your place. You didn't seem to want them there; but for the last few nights there have been six or eight of the boys in your shebang regularly."

"Yes, I have noticed that."

"The little game was to get you used to seeing them in the saloon, so that your suspicions wouldn't be excited when the time came for them to do you up."

"I reckon you have earned your ten dollars," and the sport handed the soldier the money.

"I reckon so," the man responded, with a grin, as he pocketed the "sawbuck."

"Now you know the captain's game, and if you don't get the best of him it will be your own fault. It's coming right on to-night; don't you forget that!"

Then he slouched away in the darkness. "I think he has told the truth," Garcia said.

"Yes, there is hardly a doubt about the matter. I knew the captain would never be satisfied until he made an effort to get square with me, and from what I know of the man I expected he would try some underhand game rather than challenge me to a fair and open fight."

"Thanks to this warning, though, I will be prepared for him, and I'll see if I can't give him so warm a reception that he'll never want another like it."

As no man in the town stood any better with the citizens than Pale Jack, he had little trouble in getting a dozen good fellows to stand in with him, if the row came on.

All of them were fully armed, and they drifted into the Red Front Palace by ones, twos and threes, in the most natural manner.

The soldiers commenced to come in, too, and at ten o'clock there were eight of the boys in blue in the place.

Pale Jack had kept his eyes upon them, and saw that they were the worst men of the garrison.

All of them were under the influence of liquor, and even if the sport had not been warned he would have suspected that the gang was up to some mischief.

A few minutes after ten Captain McIntyre himself put in an appearance.

The storekeeper, Cohan, was with him, as usual, and both evidently had been drinking.

Jack was standing in the middle of the saloon, but on one side near the wall, when the pair came in, conversing with a group of friends.

The captain acted as though he did not see the sport, yet halted within a couple of yards of him, when the soldiers immediately commenced to circle to the neighborhood.

The captain waited until his men had gathered; then he turned and addressed his enemy.

"Now, Mr. Pale Jack, I think the time has come for a little settlement of our affair!" the man in gilt buttons cried, and he made a movement as if to draw a weapon.

But the speedy manner in which Pale Jack and the miners pulled their guns astonished the officer and his men.

"All ready for you, captain!" the sport announced, cheerily, "and the graveyard gate is wide open!"

And ready, indeed, the citizens were, for they had the soldiers covered before they could get at their weapons.

"I rather think I have got the dead

wood on you," Jack continued; "but, as I am always ready to give everybody a fair show, you are at liberty to go out into the street, get yourself and your blackguards in a position for a fight, and then we will go for you."

The captain was completely disgusted. His, as he supposed, carefully laid plans had completely failed, and so he was obliged to make the best of the rather provoking situation.

The officer and his men marched out into the street, the fight already taken out of the squad.

In a couple of minutes the citizens followed, when the firing began, but the scrimmage did not amount to anything, for, after the first discharge, the street seemed to be fairly alive with angry citizens, armed with all sorts of weapons.

That was enough; the soldiers retreated in a panic.

It was not strange; a half a dozen men could not be expected to fight a whole town.

There were all sorts of wild firing, but the troops succeeded in getting to their horses and away they rode for dear life, the doughty captain bringing up the rear like a crest-fallen rooster.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

The citizens were so exasperated by what they considered to be a bold attempt on the part of Captain McIntyre to "run the town," with his troopers, that scant mercy would have been shown the soldiers if any of them had been so unfortunate as to fall into the hands of the townsmen.

The people buzzed around the town like a lot of angry bees whose hive has been attacked after the soldiers rode away for dear life.

Every place of public resort in the place was filled with a crowd, eagerly discussing the events of the night.

It was a capital thing for the saloons.

Pale Jack was the hero of the hour, and a host of his friends had insisted upon his coming down to the American Hotel and holding a reception.

With the sport went Skinny Thompson, who had been one of the crowd so ready to pull a "gun" on the soldiers, and the young Mexican, Garcia.

At eleven o'clock the excitement had materially quieted down, and the citizens commenced to depart for their homes.

Pale Jack, with Skinny Thompson and Garcia, were conversing with a group in front of the hotel, when an extra stage arrived.

It only had one passenger—a young and handsome woman, nicely dressed, and who bore herself with the air of one who considered that she amounted to something.

Of course she was stared at by everybody.

She registered as Miss Black, Silver City, and made arrangements for a room with the assurance of an experienced traveler.

After securing her apartment, she retired to it, ordering some supper to be sent up, and also requesting that the driver who had brought her to the town should come to her.

This individual, Hank Henry by name, a great friend of Skinny Thompson, was conversing with Thompson and Pale Jack when the message was conveyed to him.

The Jehu grinned.

"Will I call upon the lady?" he exclaimed, winking at the three. "Well, now, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I will!"

"You see, boys, it is evident that I made a big impression on her by the way I toiled the hearse over from Silver City, and the chances are big that she wants to make me a handsome present to remember her by."

In ten minutes the driver was back.

The three had waited out of curiosity, for they were anxious to know what the lady wanted.

By this time the loungers had departed, the town having recovered its normal condition, and the group of three alone stood in front of the hotel.

"Say, boys, this is a mighty queer bit of business," the driver announced.

"What is up?" Thompson asked.

"Don't give it away, boys," Hank Henry responded, speaking in a cautious tone. "But this hyer female woman is a mighty queer one. She asked me if I knew Caretta, the superintendent of the Red Gopher mine, and when I said I did, she let on that she would give me a five-dollar note if I would hunt the cuss up and tell him she wanted to see him at the hotel to-night."

The young Mexican and Pale Jack immediately exchanged glances, while Skinny Thompson scratched the side of his nose in a reflective way and declared that "it beat all!"

"Well, Hank, you will not have any trouble in earning your five dollars," the sport remarked, "for Caretta is in the camp and holding out at Paddy Kelly's Hole in the Wall."

"You don't mean it?" the driver exclaimed in delight.

"Well, now, I will collar that five dollars easy enough. Will you come along, Skinny?"

Thompson was "agreeable," and the two departed.

"It rather looks as if something was up," Pale Jack remarked.

"Not a doubt about it," Garcia assented.

"And I think I begin to see into this mystery which has puzzled me."

"The moment I arrived at Silver City the action of this man Bickerstaff convinced me that treachery was at work, and the knowledge that I had come to this district on a certain important bit of business had been imparted to the very man of whom I was in search. The appearance of this woman in the case explains the matter."

"She is the mar-plot. The documents for the arrest of the man are on their way by the special messenger."

"She has hurried on ahead, and it is her game to arrange the affair so that the man will be safely out of the way before the legal papers can reach me."

The reader, doubtless, long ere this has guessed that the young Mexican, Garcia, was the Female Barber Detective, Mignon Lawrence, in a clever disguise.

"You will have to set your wits to work to beat the game," the sport assumed.

"Oh, yes, I don't intend the fellow shall give me the slip after the trouble I have had in hunting him down," the woman in disguise averred, with an air of firm determination.

"But you can't make a movement until this special messenger arrives with the legal documents?"

"Apparently not," and the female detective shook her head in a wise way; "but there are more ways than one to kill a cat, and I fancy I will be able to arrange a game to prevent the escape of my man, papers or no papers."

"Yes, something ought to be done, for it would be a shame for you to be baffled right in the hour of your triumph, and after all your trouble, too."

"I will keep my eyes on the parties, and I don't believe they will be able to get much the best of the game," the woman declared.

Leaving the pair to pursue their way, let us direct our attention to the lady at the hotel.

The stage driver found Caretta without any trouble, and in ten minutes from the time he set out the wanted man entered the room of the mysterious lady.

The two shook hands warmly.

"Well, Henrietta, I must say that you are about the last person whom I expected to see," Caretta confessed, as he seated himself.

"I have taken this long journey on purpose to save you!"

"To save me?"

"Yes, just that—to save you."

"Am I in such danger, then?"

"You are. Brother Andrew is on his way from the East with the necessary legal documents to send you to twenty years of prison life."

"By Heaven! I will never submit to that!" the man ejaculated, hotly. "Rather than submit to be shut up in the cold

gray stone walls for the best part of my life, I would put a revolver to my head and blow out my brains."

"Yes, I can understand that," the other replied. "But as I am a day ahead of Andrew, you will be able to get away and bid defiance to pursuit."

"By the way, did you succeed in discovering the female detective, about whom I wrote you—the woman who came to this district for the express purpose of hunting you down?"

"Yes, I spotted the party, but she has left the camp and gone I know not where."

"Probably she is at Silver City, waiting Andrew's arrival."

"Very likely."

"It does not matter, though. You will have a day's start, and with that advantage it will be a miracle indeed if they succeed in even getting on your trail."

"They do not stand any chance at all!" the man averred, confidently.

"I shall take a roundabout course, avoiding all the towns, and make my way as soon as possible into Old Mexico."

"By going up into the remote mountain region in one of the mining districts, the chances are a thousand to one that no one will ever be able to track me."

"How are you off for money?"

"I have plenty."

"I will give you some if you need it."

"No, thanks! And I can assure you that I appreciate the offer just the same. You have been like a guardian angel to me, and I am sorry that I have not been more worthy of your devotion."

"Well, we are all creatures of circumstances, and I suppose you did the best you could."

The interview ended, and Caretta departed.

A few words of explanation are due the reader in regard to this mysterious affair.

In New York City the commercial house of Andrew Harcastle stands high, the head being rated among the millionaires.

Henrietta Harcastle, the mysterious lady of the mining camp, was Andrew's sister.

Caretta's true name was Thomas Harcastle, and he was a cousin of the millionaire.

He came of a branch of the family who were without money, and from an early age the millionaire, who was over twenty years his senior, had cared for him.

From boyhood he had been wild and wayward, and the millionaire, thinking he was cut out for a life of adventure, had him educated as a civil engineer—it being his idea that in some mining enterprise he might win a fortune for himself.

The young fellow was bright enough, and so graduated without any trouble, but when he essayed to make a living for himself he was not successful.

He had managed to win the love of Henrietta, though, and although the love affair was kept from the millionaire's knowledge, the two were engaged to be married.

Through Henrietta's influence, Thomas got a situation in the millionaire's establishment. His associates were bad, and secretly he led an evil life.

At last he and his pals planned to rob the store, there being a large amount of money in the safe.

The attempt was frustrated by a youthful porter, who lost his life in the struggle.

The robbers were captured, tried, and convicted—Thomas getting a twenty-years' sentence.

Henrietta spent a small fortune, and managed to have him break jail, when he fled to the West.

It was the woman's idea that if the culprit once got safely away, her brother would not pursue, but the millionaire had a keen sense of justice. His degenerate relative had treated him in a shameful manner, and he was determined that he should be punished.

So he set the private detectives to work in order to trace the fugitive.

By playing the spy when her brother had the interview with the detectives, Henrietta managed to discover what was being done to capture the erring man.

She was in communication with him,

and so was able to send warning that the detectives were on his track.

It was this knowledge which had led to the attacks on the young woman detective, but which Mignon Lawrence had so cleverly frustrated.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PLAYING A TRUMP CARD.

It had been arranged that Caretta should come to Pale Jack's Red Front Palace at nine o'clock in the morning to receive the two thousand dollars.

Promptly to the minute the pair made their appearance, with Paddy Kelly.

The sport had got his money from the express office, the bank of the camp, and was all ready to pay it over.

In the saloon were Skinny Thompson and the disguised Mignon Lawrence, masquerading as the Mexican, Garcia.

"Now, gentlemen, if you will come with me into the private room it will not take us long to arrange this matter," Pale Jack remarked.

"These two gentlemen will witness the affair, as in a matter of this kind I consider it advisable."

"It does not make any difference to me if you have the whole camp present," Caretta observed.

All proceeded to the private room, where Caretta produced the notes which he had received from old Vanderbilt.

These Pale Jack examined carefully.

"Now give me a receipt in full for all claims which you have against the Vanderbilt estate, and I will pay over the cash," the sport said.

"It will not take me long to fix that up for you."

The release was drawn up, duly witnessed, and Pale Jack paid over the two thousand dollars.

"You have got the biggest kind of a bargain in this trade," Caretta observed, in a grumbling way; "and if I wasn't in a peculiar position just now, you can bet your life I would never have agreed to this deal."

"I reckon you are getting more out of the thing than you would ever have been able to realize in any other way," the sport rejoined.

"Well, a trade is a trade, but I can tell you that you got a mighty big advantage of me in this one," Caretta declared, rising to depart.

The rest all got on their feet, and then the company were surprised by Garcia remarking:

"I reckon that you and I have got a little business together, Mr. Caretta."

The ex-superintendent stared.

"How is that?" he demanded.

"I have got a warrant for your arrest," Garcia replied, producing a legal-looking document.

"For my arrest?" echoed Caretta, while all the rest looked on in amazement.

"Yes—a sure enough warrant!"

"Upon what charge?" Caretta demanded.

"Highway robbery!" the disguised woman replied. "You are the man who held up the stage on the road between here and Silver City."

"The accusation is ridiculous!" Caretta declared.

"Oh, no; I reckon it will do to hold you until certain legal documents arrive from the East, where you are wanted on another very serious charge."

Caretta's face grew dark with anger.

"This is monstrous! And I will not submit to it!" he threatened.

"You will not be allowed to have any choice in the matter!" the sleuth-hound retorted. "You are booked for the jail at Silver City until the warrant for you arrives, Mr. Thomas Harcastle, as you really are. So no nonsense!"

"Come in!" the detective called out.

Then the sheriff from Silver City, with a couple of deputies, made his appearance.

"You see, I have taken all precautions to insure your safe-keeping," warned Mignon.

A moment Caretta glared at this in-

flexible man-hunter, and then he drew his revolver.

But other guns were out as quickly as the desperate fugitive's.

The sheriff and his men were noted for their quickness "on the draw."

Three or four shots were fired.

Mignon got a flesh wound in the top of her shoulder, but the escaped criminal went down with a couple of revolver bullets in him, killed immediately.

Our tale is told.

Again had Joe Phenix's Mascot secured her prey, and success had attended the mission of the Female Barber Detective to the Wild West.

THE END.

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